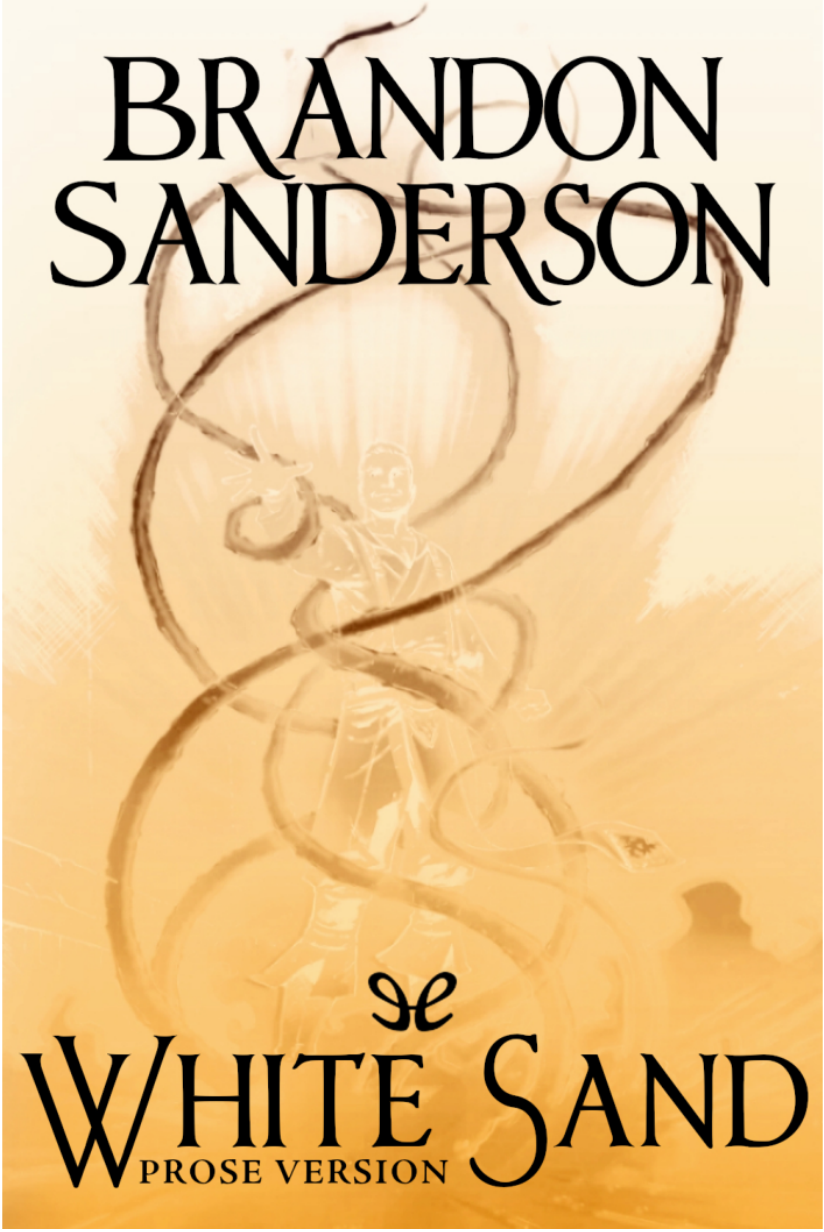
BRANDON
SANDERSON
WHITE SAND
PROSE VERSION

The planet Taldain is split into two halves: on one side are the Daysiders, and on the other the Darksiders. Some Daysiders have a unique ability to control and manipulate sand, bending it to their will to attack, or protect, as they wish. Darksiders have their own unique abilities and culture, and must wear thick dark lenses while on the Dayside. Generally speaking, Daysiders and Darksiders do not get along… and *White Sand* follows the adventures of one particular Daysider, a boy named Kenton.

But when that Sand Masters are slaughtered in a sinister conspiracy, Kenton believes himself to be the only survivor. With enemies closing in on all sides, Kenton forges an unlikely partnership with Khriss—a mysterious Darksider who hides secrets of her own.

Brandon Sanderson

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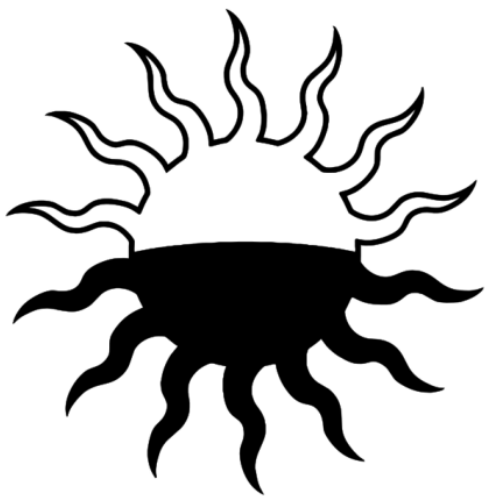
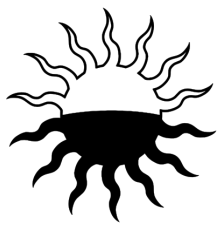


– PROLOGUE –



The wind caressed the stark dunes with a whispering touch, catching fine grains of sand between its fingers and bearing them forth like thousands of tiny charioteers. The sand, like the dunes it sculpted, was bone white. It had been bleached by the sun's harsh stare—a stare that never slackened, for here, in the empire of the white sand, the sun never set. It hung motionless, neither rising or falling, ever watching the dunes like a jealous monarch.

Praxton could feel the wind-born grains of sand biting into his cheek. He pulled up the hood of his robe, but it seemed to make little difference. He could still feel the particles attacking the side of his face like furious insects. The sand masters would have to hurry—the winds could whip the *Kerla* sands from stagnace to a whirling typhoon in a matter of minutes.

A dozen forms stood a short distance away, clothed in brown robes. They had their hoods pulled up against the wind, but it was easy to tell from their small frames that they were children, barely into their second decade of life. The boys stood uncomfortably, shuffling with nervous feet as the winds whipped at their robes. They knew how important this day was. They couldn't understand as Praxton did; they couldn't know how many times they would look back on the event, how often the results of the testing would determine the course of their lives. Still, they could sense the

significance of what was about to happen.

At the bidding of a white-robed mastrell, the boys reached into their robes and pulled out small cloth bags. Praxton watched the event with a stern face—the face he usually wore—presiding over the ceremony as Lord Mastrell, leader of the sand masters. He watched with emotionless eyes as each boy pulled a handful of white sand from within his bag. They had to hold tightly to keep the increasingly powerful wind from tearing the sand away and scattering it across the *Kerla*.

Praxton frowned, as if his simple displeasure could force the wind to abate. The testing took place close to the mountain *KraeDa*—one of the few places in the *Kerla* where stone jutted free from the sand. Here the wind was usually blocked by both mountain and surrounding cliffs.

He shook his head, taking his mind off the wind as the first boy began the testing. Two mastrells stood before him, instructing him in quiet voices that were lost upon the wind. Praxton saw the results, even if he couldn't hear the voices—the boy stared at the sand in his hand for a moment, a brief flutter of wind revealing the look of concentration on his face. The sand, cupped protectively in his open palm, began to glow faintly for a moment, then turned a dull black, like the charred remnants of a fire.

"A good start," one of the senior mastrells, Tendel, mumbled from behind him. Praxton nodded silently—Tendel was correct; it was a good sign. The boy—Praxton thought he recognized him as Traiben, son of a lower sand master—had been able to make the sand glow bright enough to be seen even from a short distance, which meant he had at least moderate power.

The testing continued, some of the boys producing glows similar to Traiben's, some barely managing to turn the sand black. Over all, however, it was an unusually strong batch. They would bring much strength to the Diem.

There was a sudden flash, one so bright that it produced an explosive crack loud enough to be heard even over the wind. Praxton blinked in surprise, trying to clear the bright after-image from his eyes. The two mastrells performing the test stood stunned before a small child with a shaking hand.

Tendel whistled beside Praxton. "I haven't seen one so powerful

in years," the old mastrell mumbled. "Who is that?"

"Drile," Praxton mumbled despite himself. "Son of *Reenst* Rile."

"A profitable catch in more than one way, then," Tendel noted.

The testing mastrells recovered from their surprise and moved on to the next, and final, boy. Despite his age, his determined calmness, and his stern nature, Praxton felt his heart beat a little more quickly as the final child listened to their instructions.

Oh please, felt himself mutter in a half-conscious prayer. He was not a religious man, but this was his final opportunity. He had failed so many times before…

The boy looked at his sand. His hood had fallen to the wind, and his face, round and topped pile of short blonde hair, adopted a look of total concentration. Praxton held his breath, waiting, excited in spite of himself.

The boy stared at the sand, his teeth clenched. Praxton felt his excitement dribble away as nothing happened. Finally, the sand gave a very weak glimmer—one so dark Praxton couldn't be certain he hadn't just imagined it—then faded to a dun black.

Though he knew he betrayed no look of disappointment, Praxton felt the senior mastrells around him grow stiff with anticipation.

"I'm… sorry, Lord Mastrell," Tendel mumbled beside him.

"It is nothing," Praxton replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Not every boy is meant to be a sand master."

"But… this was your last son," Tendel pointed out—a rather unnecessary acknowledgement, in Praxton's estimation.

"Take them away," Praxton ordered in a loud voice. *So, this will be my legacy,* he thought to himself. *A Lord Mastrell who couldn't produce a single sand master child. I will remembered as the man who married a woman from darkside, thereby sullying his line.*

He sighed, continuing. "Those who have skill may enter the Diem; the rest will chose another Profession."

The sand masters moved quickly, their feet sinking easily into the swirling, fine-grained dunes beneath. They were eager to seek refuge from the furious elements. One form, however, did not follow the white-robed mastrells. Small and slight of frame, the boy stood in the increasingly violent wind. His robe whipped around him, writhing like a beast in the throes of a gruesome death.

“Kenton,” Praxton mumbled to himself.

“I will be a sand master!” the young boy informed, his voice barely audible over the wind. A short distance away the line of retreating mastrells and boys paused, several heads turning in surprise.

“You have no talent for sand mastery, boy!” Praxton spat, waving for the group to continue moving. They made only a perfunctory show of obeying the order. Few people ever challenged the Lord Mastrell, especially not young boys. Such a sight was worth standing in a sandstorm to watch.

“The Law says I have enough!” Kenton rebutted, his small voice nearly a scream.

Praxton frowned. “You’ve studied the Law, have you boy?”

“I have.”

“Then you know that I am the only one who can grant advancement in the Diem,” Praxton informed, growing more and more furious at the challenge to his authority. It looked bad to be confronted by a child, especially his own son. “The Lord Mastrell must give his approval before any sand master can increase in rank.”

“Every rank but the first!” Kenton shouted back.

Praxton paused, feeling his rage build. Everything beat against him—the insufferable wind, the boy’s insolence, the other sand masters’ eyes… The worst of it was his own knowledge. Knowledge that the boy was right. Anyone who could make the sand glow was technically allowed to join the Diem. Boys with less power than Kenton had become sand masters. Of course, none of them had been children of the Lord Mastrell. If Kenton joined the Diem, his inability would weaken Praxton’s authority by association.

The boy continued to stand, his posture determined. The windblown sand was piling around his legs, burying him up to the knees in a shifting barrow.

“You will not find it easy in the Diem, boy,” Praxton hissed. “By the sands, see reason!”

Kenton did not move.

Praxton sighed. “Fine!” he declared. “You may join.”

Kenton smiled in victory, pulling his legs free from the dune and scrambling over to join the line of students. Praxton watched

motionlessly as the boy moved.

The buffeting wind tore at his robes, sand scraping its way into his eyes and between his lips. Such discomfort would be little compared to the pain Kenton would soon know—the Diem was a place of unforgiving politics, and sheer power was often the means by which a sand master was judged. No, life would not be easy for one so weak, especially since his father was so powerful. No matter what Praxton did, the other students would resent Kenton for supposed coddlings or favoritism.

Oblivious to the trials ahead of him, the young boy made his way to the caves a short distance away. It appeared as if Praxton's final child would also prove to be his largest embarrassment.

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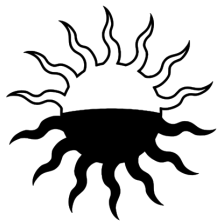


It almost seemed to Kenton as if the sands were breathing. Heat from the immobile sun reflected off the grains, distorting the air—making the dunes seem like they were composed of tiny coals, white-hot with energy. In the distance, Kenton could hear wind moaning through crevices in the rock. There was only one place in the enormous dune-covered expanse of the *Kerla* that such rock protrusions could be found: here, beside Mount *KraeDa*, in the place sacred to the sand masters. Everywhere else the sands were far too deep.

Kenton, now a man, once again stood before a group of mastrells. In many ways he was very similar to the boy who had stood in this exact place eight years before. He had the same close-cropped blondish hair, the same roundish face and determined expression, and—most importantly—the same look of rebellious conviction in his eyes. He now wore the white robes of a sand master, but, unlike most others of his kind, he wore no colored sash. His sash was plain white—the sign of a student who hadn't yet been assigned a rank in the Diem. Tied at his waist was another oddity—a sword. He was the only person in the group of sand masters who was armed.

"Don't tell me you intend to go through with this foolishness?" the man in front of Kenton demanded. Praxton, looking older than

the sand itself, stood at the head of the Diem's twenty gold-sashed mastrells. Though he had seen barely sixty years, Praxton's skin was dry, wrinkled like a fruit that had been left out in the sun. Like most sand masters, he wore no beard.

Kenton looked back defiantly, something he had grown very good at doing over the last eight years. Praxton regarded his son with a mixture of disgust and embarrassment. Then, with a sigh, the old man did something unexpected. He moved away from the rest of the mastrells, who stood silently on the rock plateau. Kenton watched with confusion as Praxton waved him over, standing far enough away from the others that the two could have a private conversation. For once, Kenton did as commanded, moving over to hear what the Lord Mastrell had to say.

Praxton looked back at the mastrells, then turned back to Kenton. His eyes only briefly shot down at the sword tied at Kenton's waist before coming up to stare him in the eyes.

"Look, boy," Praxton said, his voice cracking slightly as he spoke. "I have suffered your insolence and games for eight years. The Sand Lord only knows how much trouble you've caused. Why must you constantly defy me?"

Kenton shrugged. "Because I'm good at it?"

Praxton scowled.

"Lord Mastrell," Kenton continued, more serious but no less defiant. "Once a sand master has accepted a rank, he's forever frozen in that place."

"So?" Praxton demanded.

Kenton didn't answer. He had refused advancement four times now, a move that had made him into a fool and a novelty before the rest of the Diem. Inept students were sometimes forced to spend five years as an acolent, but never in the history of sand mastery had anyone remained a student for eight.

Praxton sighed again, reaching down to take a sip of water from his *qido*. "All right, boy," Praxton finally said. "Despite the pain—despite the shame—I will admit that you've worked hard. The Sand Lord knows you haven't any talent to speak of, but at least you did something with the small amount you have. Give up this stupid decision to run the Path, and tomorrow I'll offer you the rank of fen."

Fen. It was the next to lowest of the nine sand master ranks; only underfen—the rank Kenton had been offered the four previous years—was beneath it.

"No," Kenton informed. "I think I want to be a mastrell."

"*Aisha*!" Praxton cursed.

"Don't swear now, father," Kenton suggested. "Wait until I run the Path successfully. Then what will you do?"

Kenton's defiant words were more optimistic than his heart, however. Even as his father raged, Kenton felt the questions resurfacing.

What on the sands am I doing? Eight years ago no one thought I could even be a sand master, and now I've been offered a respectable rank in the Diem. It isn't what I wanted, but…

"Boy, you're inept enough to make the Hundred Idiots look brilliant. Running the Mastrell's Path won't prove anything. It's meant for mastrells—not for simple acolents."

"The Law doesn't say a student cannot run it," Kenton said, thoughts of his inadequacy still strong in his mind.

"I won't make you a mastrell," Praxton warned. "Even if you find all five spheres, I won't do it. The Path is not a test or a proof. Mastrells run it if they want to, but only after they've been advanced. Your success will mean nothing. You'll never be a mastrell—you aren't even worthy to be a sand master!"

Praxton's words burned away Kenton's doubts like water in the sun. If there was one person who could fuel Kenton's sense of defiance, it was Praxton.

"Then I'll be an acolent until the day I die, Lord Mastrell," Kenton replied, folding his arms.

"You can't be a mastrell," Praxton reiterated. "You don't have the power."

"I don't believe in power, father. I believe in ability. I can do anything a mastrell can; I just have different methods." It was an old argument, one he had been making for the last eight years.

"Can you slatrify?"

Kenton paused. No, that was one thing he couldn't do. Slatrification, the ability to change sand into water, was the ultimate art of sand mastery. It was wildly different from sand mastery's other abilities, and none of Kenton's creativity or

ingenuity could replicate it.

"There have been mastrells who couldn't slatrify," Kenton replied weakly.

"Only two," Praxton replied. "And both were able to control over two dozen ribbons of sand at once. How many can you control, boy?"

Kenton ground his teeth. It was a direct question, however, and he couldn't refuse to respond. "One," he finally admitted.

"One," Praxton repeated. "One ribbon. I've never known a mastrell who couldn't control at least fifteen. You're telling me you can do as much with one as they can with fifteen? Why can't you see how preposterous that is?"

Kenton smiled slightly. *Thank you for the encouragement, father.* "Well, I'll just have prove it to you then, Lord Mastrell," he said with a mocking bow, turning away from his father.

"The Path was meant for mastrells, boy," Praxton's cracking voice repeated behind him. "Most of them don't even use it—it's too dangerous."

Kenton ignored the old man, instead approaching another sand master who was standing a short distance away. His short frame cast no shadow, for the sun was directly overhead here, in the jagged rocklands south of Mount *KraeDa*. The sand master was bald and had a slightly fat, oval face. Around his waist was tied the yellow sash of an undermastrell, the rank directly below mastrell. The man smiled as Kenton approached.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Kenton?"

Kenton nodded. "Yes, Elorin, I do."

"Your father's objections are well-founded," Elorin cautioned. "The Mastrell's Path was created by a group of men with inflated egos who wanted very desperately to prove themselves better than their peers. It was designed for those with massive power. Mastrells have died running it before."

"I understand," Kenton said, but inwardly he was curious. No one who had run the Path was allowed to reveal its secrets, and for all his studying, Kenton hadn't been able to determine what could be so dangerous about a simple race through the *Kerla*. Was it the lack of water? Steep cliffs? Neither should have provided much of a challenge to well-trained sand masters.

Elorin continued. “All right then. The Lord Mastrell has asked me to mediate your run. A group of us will watch as you move through the Path, evaluating your progress and making certain you don’t cheat. We cannot help you unless you ask, and if we do the intervention will end your run where it stands.”

The shorter man reached into his white sand master’s robes, pulling out a small red sphere. “There are five of these hidden on the Path,” he explained. “Your goal is to find all five. You may start when I say so. You have until the moon passes behind the mountain and reappears on the other side. The test is over the moment you either run out of time or you find the fifth sphere.”

Kenton looked up. The moon circled the sky once per day, hovering just above the horizon the entire time. Soon it would pass behind Mount *KraeDa*. He would probably have about an hour, a hundred minutes, to run the path.

“So don’t have to make it back to the starting point?” Kenton clarified.

Elorin shook his head. “The moment the moon reappears, your run is over. We will count the spheres you have found, and that is your score.”

Kenton nodded.

“You may not take your *qido* with you,” Elorin informed, reaching out a hand to take Kenton’s water bottle from his side.

“The sword too,” Praxton called from behind, his lips curled downward in their characteristic look of disapproval.

“That is not in the rules, old man,” Kenton objected, his hand falling to the hilt.

“A true sand master has no need of such a clumsy weapon,” Praxton argued.

“It’s not in the rules,” Kenton repeated.

“He is right, Lord Mastrell,” Elorin agreed. He was frowning too —as kind as the undermastrell was, even he didn’t agree with Kenton’s insistence on carrying a sword. In the eyes of most sand masters, weapons were crass things, meant for lowly Professions such as soldiers.

Praxton rolled his eyes in a look of frustration, but made no further objections. A few minutes later the last bit of the moon’s sphere disappeared behind the mountain.

“May the Sand Lord protect you, young Kenton,” Elorin offered.

The path started simply enough, and Kenton quickly found the first two spheres. The red sandstone globes had been so easy to locate, in fact, that he began to worry that he had missed something. Unfortunately, Kenton knew that he didn’t have time to go back and recheck his steps. Either he found them all on the first try, or he failed.

That determination drove Kenton forward as he ran across the top of a rock ledge. Around him the strange formations of stone jutted from the sand floor, some rising hundreds of feet into the air, others barely breaking the surface. The scenery was familiar to him—the sand masters came to this place every year to choose new members and award merits to old ones. It was almost a sacred place, though sand masters tended to be irreligious. None of the *Kerla*’s Kershtian inhabitants came to this place—its sand was far too shallow to sustain a town. In fact, few even knew of its existence. It was a place of the sand masters.

And, for four years, it had been a place of embarrassment—to Kenton at least. Four years of standing before the entire population of the Diem, presenting himself for an advancement that would not be granted. He knew that most of the others considered him a fool—an arrogant fool. At times, he wondered if they might be right. Why did he keep pushing for a rank he did not deserve? Why not be satisfied with what Praxton was willing to give him?

Life in the Diem had not been easy for Kenton. Sand master society was ancient and stratified—new students were immediately given positions of leadership and favor based on their power. Those with lesser ability were made the virtual servants and attendants of those more talented—and such was a situation that continued up through the entire sand master hierarchy.

To them, power was everything. Kenton had watched the other acolents in his group, and seen how easily sand mastery came to them. They didn’t have to stretch themselves, didn’t have to learn how to control their sand. Their answer to any problem was to throw a dozen ribbons at it and hope it went away. Today, Kenton intended to prove that there was a better way.

Kenton paused, stopping abruptly. He had run out of ground—directly in front of him the sand-covered earth ended in a steep

chasm. It rose again perhaps fifty feet away. He could barely make out a flag flapping on the other side of the gorge—a marker to indicate the direction he was to take.

And so the real test begins, Kenton thought, reaching down to grab a handful of sand from the ground. Another sand master, one more powerful, could have leapt the chasm, propelling himself through the air on a stream of sand. Kenton didn't have that option.

So, instead, he jumped off the cliff.

He plummeted toward the ground, his white robes flapping in the sudden wind. He didn't look down, instead concentrating on the sand clutched in his fist.

The sand burst to life.

With an explosion of light, the sand changed from bone white to shimmering mother-of-pearl. Kenton opened his hand as he fell, commanding the sand to move. It shot forward, forming into a ribbon of light that extended from his palm toward the quickly-approaching dunes below.

When the sand had reached the ground, he commanded it to gather mass from the dunes below and move back up. A second later there was a shimmering line of mastered sand extending from Kenton to the ground. He was still falling, but as he commanded the sand to push, his descent slowed. The sand worked like a shimmering coil, slowing him more and more as he approached the ground. He came to a stop just a foot above the surface of the dunes, then stepped off the ribbon and dropped to the ground. As he did so, he released the ribbon from his control, and the shimmering sand immediately darkened and fell dead. No longer white, it was now a dull black, its energy spent.

Kenton jogged along the bottom of the ravine, forcing himself not to slow despite the fatigue of sand mastery. He was beginning to regret his insistence on bringing his sword—the weapon seemed to grow more and more heavy as he ran, dragging at his side.

Going along the bottom of the chasm instead of jumping was costing him precious time. He had already wasted about sixty minutes of his hour. He licked his lips, which were growing dry. Sand mastery didn't just take strength, it required water, sucking the precious liquid from the body of the sand master. A sand master had to be careful not to master to the point that his body took

permanent damage from dehydration.

Kenton reached the second cliff and looked up, gathering his strength. In the distance he could see a group of white-robed forms. The mastrells, evaluating his progress. Even at a distance, Kenton could sense the finality in their postures. They assumed he was stuck—it was well known that Kenton could barely lift himself a few feet with his sand. Of course, that much in itself was amazing—no other sand master could do so much with only a single ribbon. Amazing or not, however, it wasn't enough to get him to the top of the cliff, which was at least a hundred feet tall.

The mastrells were turning their heads, discussing amongst themselves in voices far too distant to hear. Ignoring them, Kenton reached down and grabbed another handful of sand. He called it to life, feeling it begging to squirm and shimmer in his hand. The sand shone brightly—more brightly, even, than that of a mastrell. Kenton could only control one ribbon, but it was by far the most powerful ribbon any sand master had ever created.

This had better work… Kenton thought to himself.

He let the sand slip forward, dropping to the ground like a stream of water. There, he gathered more sand, calling to life as much as he could handle—enough to make a thin string perhaps twenty-feet long. This time, however, he didn't form the sand into the ribbon. Instead he created a step.

He couldn't lift himself very far, true. The higher a sand master lifted himself in the air, the more sand was required, and Kenton could only control a relatively small amount. He could, however, hold himself in place.

Taking a breath, he stepped onto his small platform of sand, pressing his body against the rough stone cliff face. Then, holding on as best he could and not looking down, he began to inch sideways, dropping sand off one edge of the platform and replacing it on the other. He concentrated on making his sand cling to the cliff wall, slipping in cracks and holding to its imperfections, rather than pushing it against the ground. Slowly, Kenton moved to the side, sloping his platform of sand just enough that he moved in a diagonal direction up the wall.

He must have looked incredibly silly. Sand masters were supposed to flow and dance, soaring through the air in clouds of

radiant sand, not creep up the side of a wall like a sleepy sandling. Still, the process worked, and barely a few minutes later he was nearing the top of the chasm. It was then that he noticed something—a small ledge about ten feet down the side of the cliff. Perched on the ledge was a small red sphere.

Kenton smiled in triumph, maladroitly climbing onto the top of the ledge. He then shook his rectangle of sand into a ribbon and sent it to collect the sphere. Guided by his commands, the rope of sand wrapped around the sphere and brought it back to its master. There were only two spheres left to find. Unfortunately, he had just over thirty minutes to do so.

The group of mastrells watched him with dumbfounded frowns as he jogged past the marking flag and located the next one in the distance. The rocks were growing more and more frequent now, forming caverns and walls of stone. Kenton moved along on the sandy ground, his eyes searching for any hints of red. The next sphere couldn't be far away—if he guessed right, the path wound in a circle, and he was nearing the place where he had started. For a moment, his horror returned—had he missed two entire spheres?

A short distance away several lines of glimmering sand marked his silent followers. True to mastrell form, each of them was making a huge display of power, gathering as many ribbons of sand around them as they could manage. While it wasn't actually possible to fly with sand mastery, powerful mastrells could launch themselves in extended leaps that could span hundreds of feet. Each jumping mastrell left a trail of sand behind him—sand pushing against the ground to form a means of propulsion.

The mastrells stopped atop a pillar of rock a short distance away. Kenton slowed his jog to a walk, watching them with careful eyes. The place they landed looked too predetermined to be random—the sphere had to be somewhere close. Kenton searched around him, his eyes seeking out shadows and places that could hide one of the diminutive spheres. Unfortunately, there was no shortage of options.

A short distance away a large wall-like section of rock extended from the sand. It was filled with fist-sized holes, each one extending back into darkness. With a sinking feeling, Kenton realized that this was his next test.

Any one of them could hold a sphere! He thought with an internal moan. If he had been able to control two dozen ribbons, searching through the holes would have taken no time at all. However, using his single ribbon to do the same would probably take longer than he had left.

Yet, it appeared as if that were his only choice. Sighing, Kenton brought a handful of sand to life. Perhaps he would get lucky and choose the right hole. He paused, however, as he prepared to send the ribbon forth. There had to be a better way.

His eyes skimmed the rock wall. Ironically, one thing he had learned from his lack of ability was that sometimes sand mastery wasn't the answer. His eyes almost passed over the solution before his brain registered it. A small pile of black sand. There were only two things that could change sand from white to black—water or sand mastery.

Kenton smiled, approaching the discolored sand. It wasn't pure black, more of a dull gray. It had probably been recharging in the sunlight for a couple of hours now—a few more and it would be completely indistinguishable from the white sand around it. Kenton raised his eyes from the sand, looking at the wall directly above it. Just over his head he noticed a trail of black grains sitting on the lip of one of the holes.

Kenton reached into the hole, retrieving the red sandstone sphere that was hidden in its depths. Though there was a smile on his lips when he turned to look back at the mastrells, inwardly Kenton was worried. If the sand master who had hidden the spheres hadn't been careless—if he had used his hands instead of sand mastery—Kenton would never have found the sphere.

Still, he couldn't help feeling a sense of satisfaction as the mastrells jumped away, twisting ribbons of sand carrying them into the air. Now there was only one sphere left. If Kenton found it, he would have succeeded in a task that baffled many mastrells.

As he moved to begin running again, Kenton noticed one of the mastrells had stayed behind. Even though the column of rock was far away, somehow Kenton knew that the stooped-over form belonged to his father. The wind wailed through rock hollows around Kenton as he stared up at Praxton's face.

The Lord Mastrell was not pleased. Kenton stared at him for a

long moment, trying to project his defiance. Eventually, Praxton raised his hands, summoning a dozen strings of sand from the floor below. They twisted around him like living creatures, their bright translucent glow shifting from color to color in the way of mastered sand. When Praxton jumped, the ribbons threw him into the air, and Kenton was left alone beside the rock wall.

One more. Kenton took a deep breath and started to move again. He was running out of time—not only would the moon soon reappear, but he was beginning feel the affects of his sand mastery. His mouth was parched, refusing to salivate, and his eyes were beginning to burn. His brow, which had been slick with sweat during the beginning of the run, was now crusted with salty residue. The price a sand master had to pay, the fuel that his art burned, was the water from his own body.

The dry mouth and eyes were the first signs that he was getting close to doing permanent damage to himself. The first thing a sand master learned was to keep track of his water, to pace himself so he didn't overmaster. Students who even approached the point of overmastery were severely punished.

If only I could slatrify, he thought, not for the first time. There was a reason the ability to change sand into water was the most valuable of sand mastery's skills.

Casting such thoughts aside, Kenton continued to jog. The rock walls were rising high around him again. Even as he began to think the area looked familiar, he rounded a corner and stopped. Up ahead he could just barely make out the rock plateau where he had begun the Path. The mastrells stood atop it, waiting for him to approach.

Kenton paused with a groan, leaning against the smooth rock wall. His breath was beginning to come more and more difficulty; both running and sand mastery sapped strength, and his dry throat made each breath painful. The mastrells held his *qido* and its water—he anticipated that first drink with such ferocity that he almost didn't care that he had failed.

And he had failed. Somewhere, back on the path, he had missed one of the spheres. He had done well—four out of five was a respectable number. Some of the mastrells he knew had only found three. Unfortunately, Kenton couldn't afford anything less than

perfection. Praxton wouldn't see the four spheres his son had found, but the one he had missed.

Kenton rested the back of his head against the rock for a moment. He briefly considered turning back to try and find the sphere, but he probably only had ten minutes left. That was barely enough time to make it back to the rock wall where he had found the last sphere. He opened his eyes and stood upright. He knew he had done better than anyone could have assumed.

Kenton kicked away the wind-blown sand that had gathered at his feet, striding out into the middle of the basin. Realistically, he knew that even a successful run of the Path wouldn't have changed Praxton's mind. The Lord Mastrell was as harsh as the sands themselves; few things impressed him.

Kenton picked up a handful of sand—he would have to use his step method to climb up the back of the rock basin and join the mastrells. He only paused for a moment to regard the strange rock formation around him. The sides were smooth and steep, almost forming a pit with a sand-filled bottom, perhaps fifty feet across. How many years had it taken the *Kerla*'s dry winds to carve such an odd bowl-like formation?

Kenton froze, his abrupt stop kicking up a small spray of sand. As his eyes had scanned the basin, they fell on something so dumbfounding it almost caused him to trip in surprise. There, sitting in the middle of the circular flooring of sand, was a speck of red. It sat like a drop of blood, stark against the white background. Ripples in the sand had caused him to miss it earlier, but now there was no mistaking the red sphere.

Kenton looked up at the mastrells with confusion. They stood along the rim of the basin, their white robes fluttering, as if in unison, before the wind.

Something's wrong. There had to be more—some test. This was the last sphere. It should have been the most difficult to find.

Only a moment later he felt the sand begin to shift beneath his feet.

"*Aisha*!" Kenton yelped in surprise, jumping backward. It couldn't be…

The sand near the sphere began to churn like boiling water. There was something beneath it—something that was rising.

Deep sand! Kenton thought with shock. The sand-filled pit must go down further than he had assumed.

A black form burst from the sand, burying the sphere in a wave of sand. Kenton gasped in amazement as he regarded the creature that slid from the ground. Sand streamed like water off the twenty-foot tall monstrosity's carapace as it rose into the air. Its body was formed of bulbous, chitenous segments stacked on top of one another. A pair of arms sprouted from each 'waist' where segments met, arms that were tipped with thick, jagged claws. Its head—if that was the right term—was little more than a box with deep black spots instead of eyes, with no visible mouth. The worst thing was, Kenton knew that the bulk of the creature's body was probably still hidden beneath the sands.

He was so busy staring that he was almost crushed as the creature swiped a claw in his direction. Kenton yelped, dodging to the side, dashing toward the wall of the basin. The sandling's body was huge—perhaps ten feet wide. Kenton was going to have a difficult time staying out of its way.

His body, invigorated by adrenaline and excitement, no longer responded sluggishly. His heart began to race, but his mind worked even faster. Kenton had read of deep sandlings, and even seen drawings of them, but he had never visited deep sand in person. Few people—even Kershtians—were foolish enough to wander onto deep sand. Mentally, he ran through the catalogue of deep sandlings he had studied, but this one didn't seem to fit any of the descriptions. Kenton dodged again as the sandling reached for him. The creature seemed to glide through the sand as if it were water—Kenton could barely see the thousands of tiny hair-like tentacles that lined the beast's carapace, the means by which it moved.

All observation was abandoned as the creature's claw slammed down in front of him. Kenton dropped to the sand, barely rolling out of the way as a second claw swiped through the air above him. The creature was incredibly fast—there was a reason deep sand was regarded with terror. The creatures that lurked within its depths were said to be nearly indestructible.

Kenton rolled to his feet, thankful for the hours he had spent sparring with soldiers from the Tower. His movements were quick and dexterous as he whipped his sword free with his left hand and

grabbed a handful of sand in the other.

"We cannot intercede unless you ask!" a voice came from above. Kenton didn't spare a look upwards, instead focusing on his foe. The creature had eyespots on each side of its head—it would not be easy to surprise. Of course, sandlings were said to have poorly developed sight. Their true sense was the sand itself. It was more than an ability to feel movement, for some reason sandlings could sense the location of even a completely still body. The Kershtians said deep sandlings could actually speak with the sand, though few from Lossand gave credence to their mysticisms.

"Didn't you hear me?" the voice repeated as Kenton dodged again. "Ask us to bring you out!" It belonged to Elorin. Kenton ignored him, calling his sand to life as he spun away from a claw. He raised his sword, deflecting a second attack. The creature's strength was such that his parry barely seemed to do much good, but it did allow him to dodge the attack just long enough to strike.

Even as he turned, Kenton raised his fist, commanding his sand forward. The sand tore out of his palm, streaking toward the sandling's head. It extended like a spear from Kenton's hand, leaving a glowing trail behind. The sand moved so quickly it seemed to scream in the air—Kenton might not be able to control dozens of lines at once, but when it came to a single ribbon, he was unmatched. No sand master could move sand with half as much speed or precision.

The sand snapped against the creatures shell of a head and immediately lost its luster, spraying to the sides like a stream of water hitting a stone wall. Kenton stood in confusion, so stunned that the creature's next attack took him in the side, throwing him back against the stone wall and ripping a deep gash in his shoulder. Kenton's sword dropped to the sand, slipping from stunned fingers.

The sandling was *terken*. It was impervious to sand mastery.

Kenton cursed again, feeling blood begin to flow from his shoulder. He had, of course, read of *terken* creatures, but they were supposed to be extremely rare. Only the most ancient and feared of deep sandlings—creatures said to be protected by the Sand Lord himself—had *terken* shells. How had one come to live here, in the middle of shallow sands and rock formations?

Regardless, it was obvious what he was supposed to do. All

sandlings, whether from the deep sands or not, had one powerful weakness: water. The liquid could dissolve their carapaces, melting away their shell and skin, leaving behind nothing but sludge.

It made sense. The final challenge in the Mastrell's Path would test the most powerful of sand mastery's skills—the ability to change sand into water. With Slatrification, a sand master could melt away the sandling's shell with barely a thought. Unfortunately, Kenton couldn't slatrify. Suddenly Elorin's suggestion that he escape made a great deal of sense.

Kenton cast his speculations aside, concentrating on staying alive. He was moving more and more slowly; he could feel himself weakening. Trying to ignore the pain of his shoulder, he stooped as he ran, grabbing another handful of sand. As the next attack came he used the mastered sand to give himself a boost, jumping high into the air and tumbling over the claws.

Kenton dropped heavily to the sand, then scrambled in the direction of the sandling's original position. Somewhere in that sand was the sphere. He didn't really need to kill the sandling; he just needed to find the sphere and get away.

He released his sand, dropping it to the ground black and stale. Instead, he placed his hand on the ground near where he had last seen the sphere. He called ribbon after ribbon to life, commanding them to jump away and then releasing them. Sand flew from the ground where he knelt; he commanded and released ribbons in such quick succession that it almost seemed like he could control more than one at a time.

Unfortunately, the sandling did not leave him to his digging. Kenton's jump had confused it, but it quickly reoriented itself. It came at him, the only sound of its movement that of sand rubbing against sand. Kenton continued to dig until the last moment, then dashed away, running desperately. He could feel the dryness on his skin, and each time he blinked his lids seemed to stick to his eyes. His lungs were beginning to burn, and his breaths came painfully. He was approaching the last of his water reserves—he would probably even be chastised for going this far. *For the good of the Diem, one mustn't even come close to overmastery*, the familiar teaching claimed. It was time to give up.

Just as he made the determination to escape, however, he saw

it. Resting beside the far wall of the basin was a speck of red, brighter than the dark drops of his own blood which ran behind him. Crying out, Kenton switched directions, ducking beneath the sandling's arms and dashing so close to its body that he could smell the sulfurous pungence of its carapace.

And, as he ran by the creature, feeling the sand slither beneath his feet from the sandling's motion, he noticed an incredulous sight. There, trapped between two bowl-like chinks in the sandling's carapace, was another red sphere.

Kenton continued his dash, his mind confused. He stopped beside the wall, digging in the sand until his fingers found something round and hard. He pulled the sphere free, looking at it with a frown, then turned his eyes back on the sandling. From this angle he could see it distinctly—a red sphere, just like the five he had already found. There weren't five spheres on the Path, but six.

Kenton dropped the sphere into the pouch at his side, then turned eyes up to the edge of the cliff. Directly above he could see the faces of twenty mastrells looking down at him. He could escape now; his time was probably all but up anyway. He had won—he had found all five spheres. What was he waiting for?

For some reason he turned eyes back at the sandling. Its shell and skin were *terken*, but its insides…

Kenton knew his father wouldn't be satisfied with perfection—he never was. Praxton would demand more. Well, Kenton would give him more.

The mastrells cried out in surprise as Kenton dashed away from the wall, his face resolute.

"Idiot boy!" Praxton's voice sounded behind him.

Kenton brought sand to life, whipping it past the creature and using it to snatch his discarded sword from the sand floor. The blade flashed through the air, carried on fingers of sand. Kenton caught it as he ducked beneath the sandling's first attack, grabbing a second handful of sand as he came up barely inches from the creature's chest.

With a cry of determination, Kenton slammed his sword into the creature's side. The blade slipped off a segment of carapace and crunched through a less-protected line of skin, digging deeply into the soft area between plates. Kenton jammed the weapon in with all

the strength he had left.

Suddenly, his sword jerked, then ripped free from his hands, blasted backward by a powerful force. A loud hissing sound exploded from the cut. He had pierced the skin. Kenton caught a face-full of acrid gas—what sandlings had instead of blood—just before one of the monster's legs caught him full in the chest, flinging him into the air.

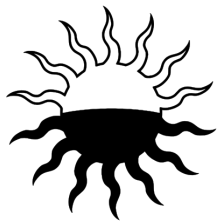
Even as he soared away from the creature, Kenton called the sand in his fist to life. He commanded it forward, driving it with all of his skill. Kenton slammed against the rock wall at the same time that his sand hit the creature's chest, yet he did not release control of his ribbon. He felt his body slump to the ground, but ignored the pain, commanding his sand to find the cut, to wiggle past the *terken* carapace into the creature's cavernous insides. He had to fight against air pressure and his own approaching unconsciousness, but he refused to release the sand.

He felt it break through, the resistance of the air pressure suddenly vanishing. With a final surge of effort, Kenton ordered the ribbon around wildly, slicing it through organs inside the monster's chest. The sandling began to shake and spasm as Kenton commanded the sand to move vaguely upwards. A second later Kenton found the head, and the sandling grew rigid in a sudden motion, throwing sand in all directions. Then, as silent in death as it had been in life, the creature slumped to the side, its corpse sinking slightly in the sand before coming to a rest.

Kenton didn't know where he found the strength to stumble to his feet and cross the sand. He only vaguely remembered retrieving his sword and using it to pry the sixth sphere free from the creature's carapace.

One image remained stark in his mind, however—that of looking up at the ridge and seeing his father's hard, angry face. Just behind the Lord Mastrell, the enormous Mountain *KraeDa* towered in the distance. As Kenton watched, the silvery edge of the moon began to peek out from behind the mountain.

– 2 –



Khriss woke slowly—a method which was, in her estimation, by far the best way. She yawned in the darkness, stretching lethargically, her mind still clouded with images of dreams that were only just beyond memory. She stumbled off of the bunk, only half-aware of the ship's rocking motions beneath her, and threw open the shutters to her cabin.

The world exploded with light.

Khriss gasped, stumbling back against her bunk. Light surrounded her, drilling through her eyes directly into her brain. She threw an arm in front of her face in an attempt to ward off the burning whiteness. Head turned to the side, eyes watering in agony, she blindly searched around inside the small chest beside her bunk. Finally, she located the thick, darkened spectacles and placed them on her face.

The burning didn't stop, of course. The afterimage of what she'd seen remained like a sparkling sheet in front of her, and her mind continued to throb. As she lay on the bunk, however, her teeth clinched against the pain, her vision slowly returned and the torment lessened. Eventually, she risked opening her eyes again, though she didn't dare look out the window.

The cabin, her home for the past two months, appeared before her. Even with the darkened spectacles, the light was much brighter

than she was accustomed to. They must have finally passed through the Border Ocean's mists and crossed over to Dayside.

Shella! She wondered in amazement. *I had no idea it would be so powerful!*

A knock came at her door.

"You may enter," she mumbled.

A tall, broad-shouldered figure pushed the door open, his deep brown skin darkened even further by the effects of her spectacles. He wore a simple form-fitting shirt and a pair of canvas trousers.

"You look horrible," he commented in a flat voice.

Khriss gritted her teeth, standing up. Trust Baon to be painfully honest. "We've left the fog behind, I presume."

Baon nodded. He was also wearing a pair of the darkened spectacles. "Several hours ago. You should make an appearance on the deck—we've sighted land, and the men are anxious."

"All right," Khriss said, interest rising in her voice. "Let me put something on first."

Baon nodded, backing from the room and pulling the door closed. As soon as he left, Khriss let her excitement show, hurriedly pulling off her nightgown and throwing on the first clothing she found—a colorful blue pair of thick trousers and a knit sweater. Though it felt odd, she didn't put on a jacket. It was supposed to be warmer here on Dayside.

She checked her face in the cabin's small mirror—Baon was right, she did look horrible. Her long, black hair was tangled from sleep, and it was obvious even through the spectacles that her eyes had been watering from the pain.

She hurriedly pulled a brush through her hair, trying to make herself look at least presentable. People had certain expectations of a duchess, even one who had just awoken. Finally arriving at a compromise between excitement and grooming, she turned from the mirror and, composing herself, pulled open the door and walked out into the light.

The first thing she noticed was the burning sphere of brilliance in the sky. She found herself staring at it before her pained eyes forced her to look away. She blinked, tears forming in her eyes, but she could still *feel* it above her, blazing like an enormous eye. She immediately began to sweat—despite her relatively thin clothing.

She had read stories of the sun, and even believed some of them, but it was different to personally experience its power.

She could actually feel it burning. Even across the incredible distance, she could feel its heat on her skin like a hearthfire. *So this what a star looks like up close,* she thought. Such was the current theory back in Elis. *It's a wonder that anything can survive in its constant heat.*

The deck was busy with men. The sailors, excited to arrive after two months of sailing, were enthusiastically climbing riggings and doing other sailorly things Khriss didn't understand. The ship had been half-drifting for a month, letting the powerful Border Ocean current pull it from Darkside to Dayside. The ship had been spun through spinning maelstroms of wind, and only the clever sailing—and even more clever ship design—had allowed them to survive.

The only group of men who weren't moving stood at the front of the ship, watching land approach. Three men, dressed in nondescript trousers and coats, stood beside Baon. Their skin, like Khriss's, was dark after the fashion of Elis, but none of them approached Baon's deep blackness. None could approach his height either, the nearest standing a full six inches shorter than the massive foreigner.

Khriss crossed the deck carefully, trying to stay out of the sailors's way. As she reached the others, the three soldiers put one foot forward and bowed. One man, Flennid, stood at their lead. Typical of the Elisian military, all were of noble blood, but they were also all at least third sons.

Baon didn't bow. The mercenary simply continued to stare at the dark line in the distance—a line that was quickly resolving into a series of cliffs.

"I half thought we would fall off the side of the world, like the stories claim," the tall man mentioned as she joined him, leaning against the ship's gunnel. Baon's accent betrayed his nationality as much as his skin color—he was from Iiaria, a Kingdom on the northern end of Darkside, seat of the Dynasty itself. She'd never found a way to tactfully ask him how he had come to be a member of the Elisian military—especially since crossing Dynastic borders was expressly forbidden by law.

Khriss snorted at his reference to falling off the edge of the

world. “At worst our ship would have gotten caught in the wrong border currents and carried us right back to Darkside.”

“I know,” Baon said quietly, his eyes unreadable beneath the dark spectacles.

The other thee nobleman soldiers were talking quietly amongst themselves, and Khriss could see the excitement in their eyes. They were young—Flennid, the oldest, had probably seen twenty-two years. Young men were the only kind who volunteered for a mission like this one. They had a spirit of adventure, and were eager to be among the first Darksiders to set foot on Dayside in five hundred years. There was little frontier left on Darkside—even the glacial wastes at the center of the continent were crossed with some frequency.

Dayside, however, was something new. The only records they had of Dayside were of dubious validity, and most scholars—Khriss included—gave them little credibility. Even if they were accurate, five centuries was a long time. Traveling to Dayside was an adventure few experiences could match. It was daring, exciting, and new—precisely the sort of thing that Khriss usually avoided.

What in the name of the Divine am I doing? Khriss thought with an inward groan. Just as the approaching continent brought excitement to the soldiers, it carried dread into Khriss’ heart. *I’m not a solider or an explorer. I* hate *travelling. I’ve never even left the capital, let alone left Elis.*

Of course, that was the problem. The prince had always complained that she was far too unwilling to take risks, that she avoided excitement. He was much more free-willed.

Yes, and where did it get him? She reminded herself, only to realize a moment later that she was now guilty of exactly the same impetuousness. She had, after all, come looking for him.

Look what you’ve made me do, Gevin. When I find you, I’m going to…

“You were ordered to keep those hidden.”

Baon’s sudden comment interrupted Khriss’s musings. The tall mercenary was staring accusingly at Flennid. The younger soldier was leaning against the ships wale, his hand idly cocking and uncocking the flintlock pistol in his hand.

Flennid looked up at the accusation, his eyes hostile. “What does

it mater?" he asked. "They won't know what it is if they see it."

"Put it away, soldier," Baon said firmly.

Flennid sighed. "Yes, *Captain*," he mumbled, stuffing the pistol back into its place underneath his cloak.

Baon turned back away from Flennid, his eyes falling on Khriss's confused face.

"I thought I ordered you to leave the guns behind," she said slowly.

"You did," Baon replied.

Khriss waited for more of an explanation. "And?" she finally asked.

"I ignored you."

Khriss stopped, dumbfounded. "But…"

"Duchess," Baon said, turning black-spectacled eyes on her. "We're travelling to an unknown continent, completely blind as to what we'll find. Did you really expect your soldiers to give up the only advantage we have?"

"Well…" Khriss admitted. She was accustomed to people doing what she said. "I thought it would be a good idea to keep the technology secret, just in case."

Baon shook his head. "The boy is right about one thing. Assuming they haven't developed gunpowder on their own, then getting hold of one of our pistols will do them little good. They couldn't replicate it—they don't have the technology. They couldn't even make new gunpowder."

"True," Khriss admitted. Then she frowned. "Are you going to ignore all of my orders?"

"No. Only the stupid ones."

Khriss wasn't certain whether or not to be offended. Finally, she just sighed. If there was one thing this trip was teaching her, it was that life was much different outside of the capital. "Just keep an eye on those three. For some reason, the idea of firearms in Flennid's hands makes me nervous."

"On that we agree," Baon said with a nod.

"I doubt we'll even need the guns."

"You're optimistic. That's good. You're paying me to be the opposite, however."

"Our mission is purely to gather information," Khriss said firmly.

“We find Prince Gevalden, we learn as much as we can about Dayside, and we go home. Who knows, perhaps the Daysiders will be the ones who end up helping us.”

Baon snorted. “Duchess, if you’re intending to find something on Dayside to help you stop the Dynasty, then the legends about this place better not just be true—they’d better be gross underestimations.”

Khriss didn’t respond.

“You know,” Baon said, leaning back against the wale to look out over the waters. “You shouldn’t have put me in charge.”

Khriss frowned. Sometimes Baon’s bluntness still took her by surprise. “What do you mean?”

The large man nodded to his side, where she briefly caught sight of the three younger soldiers giving him—and Khriss—unveiled bitter looks.

“They don’t like me,” Baon informed frankly.

“They don’t have to like you to follow your orders,” Khriss responded.

“True,” Baon agreed. “But they resent me as well. Technically all three outrank me. They’re noblemen; I’m not. I’m also a foreigner.”

“You’re older than they are, you’re more experienced than they are, and you are a better leader,” Khriss replied. “Even after travelling with you for a month, I knew that much.”

“I’m also a mercenary,” Baon said, folding his arms.

“Well, so is every soldier, in a way,” Khriss argued.

“Duchess,” Baon said tolerantly, “you have a quick tongue, but, despite what politicians and scholars claim, arguing cannot change facts. Those men resent me. You should have let their natural ranks determine who would lead when Captain Deral died.”

Khriss turned away from him, instead focusing on the approaching cliffs. She was not accustomed to being contradicted—but she knew Baon was probably right. She had made a mistake. Of course, it had seemed logical at the time. Baon’s wise bluntness had impressed her from the first time they met months ago when the expedition had begun.

“Don’t berate yourself,” Baon said from beside her, leaning against the gunnel. “You’re young yet—barely as old as those boys. In fact, I’d guess you’re younger.”

He paused eyeing her to see if she corrected him which, unfortunately, she couldn't do. She hated it when people realized how young she was.

"You'll learn."

Khriss bowed her head, nodding to herself. Giving orders to the maids who brought her lunch was quite a bit different from organizing and heading an expedition to another continent. *Shella! What delusion ever persuaded me to try something like this? I should have listened to the King. Gevin will be all right—for all I know, we crossed each other in the ocean. I'll probably return from this fiasco to find him strutting about the court, laughing to himself about his silly fiancée.*

Yet, even as she thought such things, she knew that in this case her optimism was unfounded. Three years was too long. If Gevin were coming home on his own, he would have done so by now. If he were still alive…

Stop it! She warned herself. *That won't get you anywhere either.*

"Should I go wake the others?" Baon asked beside her, providing a welcome distraction from her thoughts.

"They'll probably want to see this," Khriss agreed.

The large man nodded, turning back across the deck to climb down to the lower cabins. Khriss was left alone with the three noblemen, whose faces now betrayed none of their earlier looks of resentment.

Do they dislike me too? She wondered. *I am the one that put Baon in charge of them.* Even more than her decision to cross the Border Ocean, she was beginning to wonder if she had been wrong to assume she could be a leader of men.

"I suppose that thing is going to be there the entire time we're on Dayside," a slow, droll voice said from behind her. Khriss turned to see two men climbing out onto the deck. One was glancing up at the sun overhead.

"It doesn't appear to move, Cynder," she replied with a slight smile.

The speaker, an older man with barely a few wisps of hair clinging to the top of his otherwise bald head, stepped onto the

deck, shading his already spectacled eyes. “Well,” he said in his unhurried voice, “I suppose I would have been disappointed if there weren’t some light to be found over here. The legends do say a great deal about that point, don’t they?”

Khriss couldn’t help smiling at the linguist’s voice. Professor Allstren Cynder, sixty-years old with a liver-spotted cranium to prove it, had been one of her teachers during the years of her university schooling. He had a dry, almost cynical way of speaking that was always unrushed and somewhat melodramatic. He would draw out some words just a second longer than natural, and force his voice into a monotone that was easily mistaken for disinterest. At the same time, however, there was a twinkle in his eyes, a clue that his solemn façade was just a clever way of laughing at the world and anyone foolish enough to take it too seriously.

“My lady Khrissalla,” he said, strolling over to stand beside her, offering a simple, but proper, bow, “you appear to have had a poor night—woke up on the wrong side of the ocean, I suppose.”

“By the Divine,” the second man exclaimed, giving Khriss a quick bow. “The adventure finally begins!”

Jon Acron, anthropologist, was a stoopy man of about five feet, though when it came to body mass, Acron’s sizable paunch more than made up for his lack of height. He wore the long mustache over a goatee that was the current style in Elis.

Acron stood excitedly beside the wale, his attitude a sharp contrast to Cynder’s soft dignity. Acron was practically jumping up and down with excitement—Khriss had constantly been amazed at Acron’s energy. He was overweight and well into his fifth decade, but in many ways he acted with the energy of a child.

Both anthropologist and linguist were dressed formally—they had obviously taken more time getting ready than she had. They wore suits after the fashion of their rank, with vests and matching collarpieces. The long-tailed jackets had wide, drooping sleeves, and Cynder had added pocketwatch and wristchains, as was his custom. Behind the two stood Baon, who had donned a functional knee-length jacket to obscure the two pistols at his hips.

Seeing the jacket reminded Khriss of just how hot she was. She had assumed that perhaps she would get used to it, but so far she’d had no luck. Her clothing, which had seemed so reasonable in her

shaded cabin, now felt sweltering.

Acron wasn't doing much better. In fact, the overweight man had already taken to wiping his face with a handkerchief. At the rate he was sweating, he would likely run out of dry kerchiefs before a few hours had passed.

"By the Divine, this is a dour place, isn't it?" Cynder commented.

"I'd think you would be excited, Cynder," Acron said, wiping his enthusiastic face with a handkerchief. "After all that studying you've done, now you finally get to visit."

"I studied the language, not the sun, dear man," Cynder noted, rolling his eyes and chuckling softly to himself at some joke that only he could understand.

"When do we dock?" Khriss wondered. The land was close enough now that she could see a town crouching on one of the slopes.

"In about an hour," Baon replied, leaning against the foremast. "Those cliffs taper a bit to the east, and that's apparently where our town is."

Acron shot Baon an uncomfortable look—the anthropologist always seemed nervous around Baon for some reason. Khriss looked in the direction Baon had indicated, searching for signs of a town. They probably wouldn't arrive for some time. None of them went down below, however, despite the heat.

Cynder lowered the spyglass. "It appears as if we were correct in our hypothesis."

"Let me see, man," Acron said, snatching the spyglass and putting it up to his eye.

Khriss turned from the overweight anthropologist to raise an eyebrow at Cynder.

"About their culture, my lady," Cynder explained. "I see little evidence of advanced technology."

"I concur," Acron agreed. He was scanning the city as the boat slid into the city bay. "No sign of… wait, there's a man carrying a bow. They're definitely still in the sword-age. Poor fellows."

"I can't help thinking you should say poor us," Cynder mumbled, reaching up to scratch the side of his head.

"Why?" Khriss wondered, taking the spyglass from Acron.

“From the looks of things, your soldiers seem to have discovered a couple of pistols,” Cynder said. “However, despite such and obvious advantage, the Elisian military is not known for its… martial superiority. I can’t help wondering how we’ll fare against the natives.”

Khriss shot a look at Baon.

“He has a point,” the warrior said, then nodded to Flennid and the other two noblemen standing a short distance away. “I’ve seen you Elisians fight. Your military is more a tool for the pampered to dispose of their offspring than a true defensive army. Your country remains independent through clever politics, superior technology, and the fact that it’s so small no one wants to conquer it. Those three will be practically useless against a well-trained squad of natives, pistols or no pistols.”

The ‘useless’ comment didn’t gain Baon any ground with Flennid and the others, who were just within earshot. *Honesty is one thing, Baon, but there’s also something to be said for tact.*

“We’re in a foreign land, Baon,” Khriss said in reemphasizing her earlier stance. “An ocean away from civilization. If this expedition turns violent, I doubt all the muskets in Elis could save us. You soldiers were more to get us through Dynastic blockades than to protect us from Daysiders.”

Baon nodded in agreement, and Khriss turned to scan the city. Cynder was definitely right—the population looked considerably less-advanced than what she was used to. The houses were simple clay brick for the most part, and though the streets were cobbled in places, the stones were uneven and cracked. Most of the vehicles were simple carts, rather than fine carriages, and none of the buildings had glass in the windows.

There were other differences besides the level of technology. Notably absent were the lantern-poles that lined every street in her homeland; but, of course, such wouldn’t be necessary with the sun’s constant light. The greatest difference by far, however, were the beasts of burden. Up until the point that she looked through the spyglass, Khriss had discounted the stories of strange monsters living in the deserts of Dayside. Now, however, she was forced to reconsider.

They were black in color, and the light reflected off their shiny

skin. They were proportioned something like a horse, but with shorter legs and a stumpier neck. Her first inclination was to think they were reptilian, but that was wrong. Their bodies seemed to be composed of plated segments, something like an insect, but they were proportioned nothing like bugs. More like the armored war-horses that the Dynasty sometimes employed.

Most disconcerting were their faces. They were covered with horn-like protrusions that stuck out in random directions. Each creature was different; some had only a couple, others were covered with dozens, and still others only had one massive spike sticking out like an overgrown nose.

Amazed, she lowered the spyglass and handed it to Baon. “They must be cosmetic,” she mumbled.

“What’s that, my lady?” Cynder asked.

“The horns. They must be used to frighten rivals; many of them look too weak to be used for combat.”

“Everything must have an explanation, I suppose,” the old linguist said, lounging back against the gunnel with a quiet chuckle.

“I am a scientist, Cynder,” she explained. “We explain things.”

“I thought you were a duchess.”

“Last I checked, the two weren’t mutually exclusive.”

Cynder nodded in agreement, but was still chuckling to himself.

“You’re going to have to find some dresses,” Baon noted, lowering the spyglass from his spectacled eye.

“What?” Khriss asked, turning.

“Look at the women,” Baon said, handing the glass back. “They wear dresses and keep their hair tied up under hoods. Most Darkside cultures don’t look favorably on women who dress like men, and I suspect it’s the same over here. So, you should find some dresses.”

“I have dresses,” Khriss mumbled testily, taking the spyglass back, though they were close enough now that she barely needed it. Baon was right, of course. Every woman visible, even the children, had her hair tied up and kept under a hood-like cloth. They wore one-piece dresses—actually, they fit more like robes—that were loose around the waist, and the styles didn’t seem to vary much. The men also wore loose-fitting robe, though they kept theirs tied at the waist, and many wore two layers of clothing—a shirt and skirt-

like item underneath with an open-fronted robe over the top. All of the clothing was much more drab than she was used to, the pervading colors white and tan.

"This is going to be so exciting!" Acron said, his chubby head darting from side to side as he tried to take in everything at once.

She lowered the spyglass as the ship docked. "Well, Cynder, I guess we'll soon find out how much the language has changed over the last five hundred years."

Cynder frowned slightly, nodding to himself. The only texts they had from dayside were five centuries old. Courses in daysider language were popular in the university, and Cynder was one of the experts, but underneath all of the postulation and studying was the knowledge that to darkside, at least, daysider was a dead language. They really had no clue how to pronounce the words.

She had resisted bringing Cynder on the expedition because of his age. However, he was Elis's premier authority on linguistics—the only other competent man, his assistant Wilheln, had gone with Gevin two years before. So, she had reluctantly agreed to bring Cynder on the expedition. In a way, she was glad he was along—his wry humor lightened her mood. However, she worried that the expedition would prove too much for him. Cynder was much better suited to a lecture hall than a daring exploration.

But, so are you, Khriss, she reminded herself. *You'll both just have to do what you can.*

"Let's go," she said as the sailors put down the plank. There was only a hint of a tremble in her voice.

"Iresha'takasha Ai'Dakasha Lri'Heesth'Ker'Naisha 'Totar." Cynder said the words, then smiled hopefully.

The Daysider frowned at Cynder, his eyes wide. He scuttled away immediately, as if in fear. They were an odd-looking people. Their skin was different than her own—it wasn't completely white, like darksiders from the eastern countries, but it was definitely paler than her own.

There seemed to be two races of them. Some had skin that was a little pale, kind of a dark tanish color. The rest of them had odd olive-colored skin that was a bit darker than the others, but still different from anything in Khriss's experience.

Khriss sighed watching the daysider Cynder had approached

move through the crowd, shooting them distrustful looks.

"This isn't working," she noted unnecessarily.

"I don't know what it is, My Lady," Cynder said with a frown. "At first, it seems like they might understand me—some of them, at least. They always run off, however."

"I know," Khriss said. Confusion she had expected—the language had probably changed dramatically over the last five centuries. But fear? It didn't make sense.

They stood a short distance from the docks—they had been careful to keep the ship in sight, though what good that would do Khriss didn't know. They were obviously in a market of some kind, mostly composed of one-story clay buildings with colorful tent-like drapings providing shade. The Daysiders, in general, paid Khriss and her companions little heed, streaming past the small clump of Darksiders with indifference.

Khriss found their lack of interest odd. She would have expected more… trepidation. She obviously wasn't from Dayside—not only was her skin the wrong color, but her dress was such a bright shade of green that made the shop-tents looked wan by contrast. It was one of her favorite dresses, sleek and form-fitting, unlike the bulky Daysider ones. However, standing amidst the people, looking at their functional outfits and general disregard for flamboyancy, she was suddenly self-conscious.

Still, despite her oddity, the only looks she got were at her chest—which likely had little to do with her nationality and more to do with the dress's low neckline.

And Esra told me I dress too conservatively! She thought with amusement, remembering a conversation just a few months previously. Of course, that had been on Darkside.

"Well, it's comforting to know one thing, at least," Cynder commented after making another failed attempt at speaking with a passerby.

Khriss looked up with curiosity.

Cynder smiled. "It would have been tragic if we could actually speak the language," the scholar explained. "It would have destroyed my reliance on the frivolous nature of higher learning. Some universal constants just have to remain unchallenged."

"Perhaps it's our accent," Khriss said, shaking her head at

Cynder's sarcasm.

"But, they reacted the same way to written phrases," Cynder reminded. "By the way, you might want to keep an eye on him."

Khriss followed Cynder's gesture. Acron had wandered away from them, and was poking through a shopkeeper's wares with wide, eager eyes. He didn't seem to care that they couldn't communicate—the sheer joy of being in another culture was enough for him.

Of course, it made sense. The Dynasty strictly controlled travel on darkside. Even though Elis wasn't part of the Dynasty, most of the surrounding countries were, and that made it difficult to actually visit other cultures—a frustrating situation if one were an anthropologist. Every year or so, Elis was able to trade for some Dynastic travel passes, and Acron usually managed to secure one of those. Even still, his visits to Dynastic countries would have been strictly controlled. She could understand Acron's excitement to immerse himself in a new culture without Dynastic officials watching over his shoulder.

"That man is a fool."

Khriss looked up at Flennid's hissing voice. Baon had left the other two soldiers behind on the ship, bringing only Flennid to guard them. The younger man was watching the passing crowd with suspicion, frowning and shying back whenever one of them got too close to him. His hand kept straying to his pistol.

Beside her, Baon was frowning, but not at Flennid. He was regarding Acron.

"What is it?" she asked of the large warrior. He had watched Cynder's communication attempts with disinterest—for the most part, he had instead been focused on the crowds, his eyes watchful, his posture alert. To him, dayside's newness wasn't as much exciting as it was potentially dangerous. Unlike Flennid, however, he seemed observant, rather than nervous.

Baon nodded toward Acron. "That man seems to understand him," Baon explained simply.

"What?" Cynder asked.

Khriss looked again. Baon was right, it did seem almost like… Acron were conversing with the man.

"Look in the window," Baon suggested.

She did so, squinting against the sun's light. She could barely make something out—a sign. A sign written in Dynastic.

"Shella!" she breathed in amazement. The sign read, in very distinct letters, 'Dayside Supplies and Maps.' "It's in Dynastic!" she realized.

"Yes," Cynder said slowly, noticing the board. "Though the spelling is atrocious."

"Come on," Khriss said, heading directly for the building. A shopkeeper—one of the lighter-skinned Daysiders with a broad smile and short brown hair, was speaking eagerly with Acron. He noticed Khriss's approach and smiled eagerly.

"Ah, more Darkside good friends! You want supplies, okay friend?"

"How…" Khriss said with amazement. "How does he…?"

"I don't know," Acron said. "He just started talking to me. Amazing, isn't it?"

"Good Dynastic, yes friend?" the daysider said with satisfaction. "Darksider come much, escape Dynasty. Very bad. Much exciting. Need much supplies, yes friend?"

"Perhaps the Dynastic blockades aren't as effective as dear Emperor Scythe would have us believe," Cynder noted at her side.

"Much Darksiders," Khriss repeated. "How many?"

"One, maybe two ship one week," the man explained.

"Shella!" Khriss said with disbelief. "Those blockades are supposed to be impervious. The Dynasty doesn't even let its subjects travel from one province to another! There's no way they let that many ships escape."

"We got through," Baon noted.

Khriss turned "True," she agreed. "We got through."

"And it wasn't very hard," the warrior continued.

"We lost two men!" Flennid objected, still looking at the daysiders with anxious eyes.

"Also, true," Khriss agreed. "And not just any men—Captain Deral and his lieutenant were well-trained warriors."

"They weren't killed by the blockade," Baon explained. "We lost them sneaking out of Elis and crossing Dynastic lands to reach the ocean. Once we were on the waters, we barely even saw another ship."

Khriss paused. She'd assumed they had just been lucky, but… "Shella," she cursed. "This just got more difficult. Come on, we'll buy supplies later."

She turned to walk away from the shop, and her entourage followed, leaving behind a disappointed shopkeeper. Khriss could hear him swearing under his breath in poor Dynastic, thinking he had lost a potential sale.

"I assume you plan to tell us what suddenly made our lives grow more difficult," Cynder said, strolling beside her.

"The Darksiders," Khriss explained. "That's why no one thinks we look strange—Darkside fugitives are a common sight."

"Ah. It is a difficult thing to realize you're not as unique as you thought."

Khriss snorted. "It is a difficult thing to realize no one in this entire town would have taken note of Prince Gevalden's arrival two years ago. I was counting on the event having been unique enough that people still remembered it. Now we have no idea which way he went."

"At least we know this is where he started," Acron chimed in.

"If the ship captain's telling the truth," Khriss mumbled.

"He has no reason to lie," Cynder pointed out. "Unless, of course, someone paid him to do so. Or he just forgot. Or maybe he wasn't really the one who ferried the prince to Dayside, and just said that to get our business. No reason beyond those three, and maybe a couple more."

"All right, back to the ship," Khriss decided. "I have to think."

The group began to wander back toward the ship. Khriss walked quietly, thinking to herself. How was she going to find Gevin now? Their ability to speak the language had proven even less-useful than she had assumed, and the fact that darksiders were common on dayside…

She only had one option. The sand mages were supposed to live in a kingdom called 'Lossand.' She would have to make her way in that direction and assume Gevin had done the same. She would have liked to follow his trail exactly, but…

Khriss's thoughts trailed off as something else grabbed her attention. A voice. She wasn't certain what about it bothered her—it was a faint voice, barely audible over the market's crowd. It

wasn't in Dynastic, but she felt like she could almost understand it.

Khriss stopped. The others paused, looking back at her, but she raised her hand to forestall questions.

A short distance away, sitting in an open space beside the market street, was a domed building with broad windows. People were gathered inside it, and it seemed like the voice was coming from inside. Not bothering to look to see if the others followed, she crossed the small distance to the building and peeked inside.

At the front of the room stood an olive-skinned man with a shaven head. He wore nondescript robes, with a golden chain around his neck, and in his hand he clutched what appeared to be a long spear with a bone head. Directly in the center of his forehead were a pair of stark white scar marks that formed an 'X'.

The man was speaking forcibly to the crowd, his tone familiar for some reason. He stood with his arms outstretched, the spear pointing toward the sky. The language was gibberish, though it seemed like Khriss could almost…

Ker'Naisha'Totar'Kersha. The words, pronounced almost so oddly that she missed them, suddenly jumped out at her. She would have missed them completely if they hadn't formed the single most pervasive phrase in the books she'd studied. She wasn't a genius at daysider, but she had taken some classes.

"May the Sand Lord Bless us," she whispered. The words, or ones similar to them, ended nearly half the sentences written in dayside, one of the reasons the dayside books were so incredibly thick.

"I understand it too," Cynder whispered. "It seems to be a speech of some sort. A religious ceremony?"

Khriss frowned. He obviously understood more than she did.

Cynder stepped forward into the room, clearing his voice. The man at the front looked down at him with a frown of annoyance.

"*"Iresha'takasha Ai'Dakasha—"* Cynder began, obviously trying to pronounce them as clearly as possible.

"*Aiesha!"* the man said angrily. "*A'Reel Karshad'n Shan'Tershadan!*"

Cynder backed away before the man's anger, leaving the building and its occupants behind.

"Do you understand it?" Acron asked eagerly.

“A little,” Cynder said with a frown. “The words were spoken so quickly… Karshad. It means…”

“Holy language,” Khriss realized, her eyes opening wide with understanding.

Cynder nodded. “Why, yes. You’re right, duchess. Kar… priest. Priest-language.”

Baon snorted, “You mean…”

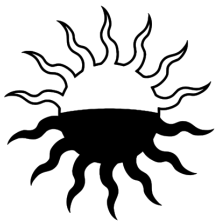
“We learned the language of the clergy,” Khriss realized.

“There is precedent for such things,” Cynder agreed. “I have studied class-specific dialects.”

Khriss sighed, turning away from the building. “Well, I guess it’s not as bad as it could be.”

“True,” Cynder agreed. “If we can’t get directions out of them, then at least we can call them to repentance.”

– 3 –



Kenton lay frozen in the darkness. He hung in forced immobility, unable to cry out, unable to feel his limbs—unable to feel anything except the horrible nothingness. Like a maelstrom of ice, the blackness ripped at his soul and flayed his mind. He struggled against it, terrified of this one awesome power that every Daysider feared. Darkness. Frigid, emotionless, lightless…

Kenton cried out, sitting up with such force that he flung the wet rag off his face, hurling it across the room. It slapped against the side of the tent, leaving a wet stain on the cloth as it plopped to the ground. Kenton sat for a moment, breathing heavily, his injured arm pulsing in protest. Finally, his heart coming under control, he groaned and reached up to wipe the droplets of water and sweat off his face.

"You're awake!" a voice exclaimed.

"Eric?" Kenton asked with confusion. Then, however, memory flooded back to him. He was on the sands. He had run the path. The voice couldn't belong to Eric—his friend had left for Darkside years before.

Standing in the tent doorway was a small, red-haired boy. Dirin. He looked younger than his sixteen years, probably because of his Talloner heritage—they were a racially small people.

"Dirin?" Kenton asked, shaking his head to clear his mind. "How

long was I out?”

“About a day,” the boy explained, still standing hesitantly at the doorway. There was a look of excitement in his eyes. “When they brought you back, Kenton, all covered in sand and blood… we assumed you were dead. But… six spheres, Kenton! How did you do it?”

Kenton looked down at his shoulder, inspecting the clean white bandage as memories of the previous day’s events returned. “Honestly, Dirin, I don’t know,” he confessed.

“Hush now, boy,” a new voice said. “Go and fetch mastrell Traiben as you were instructed.”

Dirin nodded, moving away as a taller, blondish form entered. One of the physicians maintained by the Diem, a cool man who prominently wore a Kershtian sun medallion around his chest even when working on sand masters. He walked over, feeling Kenton’s forehead and checking the bandage.

“No fever,” the healer mumbled. “I assume you will insist on attending the advancement ceremonies tonight?”

Kenton nodded, reaching for the clean sand master’s robe sitting on the floor beside his cot. Then he paused—there was something more important he needed to check first. Suddenly worried, he hesitantly reached over and scooped a pinch of sand off the tent’s cloth floor. Then, taking an anxious breath, he commanded the sand to life.

The small pile of sand flashed, glowing brilliantly and remaining in the air even when he removed his hand. Kenton sighed in relief; he hadn’t overmastered. His abilities, such as they were, still remained.

The healer’s lips turned down at the sight, but he didn’t say anything. He simply rose and left the room as Dirin returned, followed by two familiar forms.

“You scoundrel!” Traiben exclaimed, rushing over to clap Kenton on his good shoulder.

Kenton smiled, allowing his sand to fall stale. Traiben looked immaculate as always in his robes and golden sash. He had gone bald early in life, and kept what hair he had close shaven, accentuating his firm square face.

“I knew it,” Traiben continued, stepping back as Kenton threw

on his robes and tied them with a white sash. “The moment you declared you were going to run the path, I knew you would surprise us. Kenton, if you weren’t around, life in the Diem wouldn’t be half as exciting.”

Kenton shrugged, retrieving his *qido* and sword from the corner of the tent. He nodded in greeting to Elorin, who stood more reservedly at the front of the room. The aging undermastrell was often unassuming, especially when there was a mastrell in the room.

“So, how *did* I do it?” Kenton asked as he tied on his sword. “Where did that sixth sphere come from? Were there always six possible, and I’m just the first to find the last one?”

“No. It must have been—”

“Mastrell Traiben,” Elorin interrupted softly, nodding to Dirin, who had started to fold the cot’s bedsheets and place them meticulously in a pile.

“Oh, yes,” Traiben realized. “Dirin, lad, thank you for fetching us. Why don’t you go tell the Lord Mastrell that his son has recovered?”

“Yes, mastrell,” Dirin said lightly, leaving the room.

Elorin nodded for Traiben to continue. Though there was little chance the boy would ever run the Path, it was general policy not to let younger sand masters hear the Path’s secrets.

“Anyway,” Traiben continued eagerly. “There aren’t supposed to be six spheres. The one you found must have gotten left behind following someone else’s run.”

“As you might expect,” Elorin added, “spheres are often lost where the sandling is concerned. They get buried deep in the sand, where even the most powerful mastrell wouldn’t be able to retrieve them. It is just assumed that they will never turn up again, but…”

“One must have gotten lodged in the creature’s carapace,” Kenton realized, taking a ladle of water from the bucket next to the doorway.

“For all we know, it could have been my sphere. I only found three of them, you know.”

“What’s the other one you missed?” Kenton asked curiously.

Traiben flushed slightly. “The one on the cliff ledge. I just jumped over the canyon, never bothering to look down.”

Kenton smiled slightly to himself. It made sense—Traiben was known for his impetuousness. Still, the failure had been difficult for the mastrell. Kenton could remember well his return to the camp after only finding three of the spheres, his normally energetic personality reserved.

Kenton remembered being slightly surprised at the failure. Traiben was one of those rare individuals who was good at everything he tried. He had entered the Diem the same day as Kenton, but had quickly proven himself a capable sand master. He hadn't even needed to stretch himself to make mastrell—though it was impossible to be jealous of him. Traiben was just too amiable. Sometimes Kenton found it frustrating—if only Traiben were a bit more like Drile, then it would be possible to envy him. As it was, they remained friends even despite Traiben's status as a mastrell, something that should have kept him from associating with a lowly acolent.

"The Lord Mastrell is calling sixth sphere invalid," Traiben was saying. "But, that doesn't really matter—the entire Diem has already heard about what you did."

Kenton shrugged, pulling open the tent flap to check the time. The moon hovered above the horizon in the northeast; it was about seventh hour, just past mid-day. The advancement ceremony wouldn't be until tenth hour.

"The Lord Mastrell is, of course, rather perturbed with you," Traiben noted.

Kenton smiled. "When isn't he?"

"Now more than usual, acolent," Elorin explained. "You weren't supposed to slay the creature."

Kenton looked away from the moon, instead turning to study Elorin's reserved face. Up until six months ago, the undermastrell had been the one who oversaw the training of new sand masters. He hadn't ever explained why he had given up the position, or why he continued to pay particular attention to Kenton. The man had a gentle wisdom about him that was far more powerful than any mastrell's sand, and Kenton could sense there was something behind his words. He seemed… anxious for some reason.

"What do you mean?"

"The Path is destroyed forever now, Kenton," the undermastrell

explained. “No one knows how that deep sandling came to be isolated so far away from the deep sands, but it was the central trial of the Path. More mastrells failed to recover that one sphere it was guarding all the other spheres combined. For centuries the mastrells have fed the monster, using it to test their newer members. Now it is gone.”

Kenton frowned.

“Good riddance,” Traiben mumbled. “When that thing burst from the sand I nearly died from the shock.”

“Wait a minute,” Kenton interrupted. “You can slatrify. Why did it give you trouble?”

“I did slatrify,” Traiben explained. “It fled beneath the sand as soon as I tossed a handful of water on it. Unfortunately, it took the sphere with it. Its digging probably buried the sphere all the way down to Darkside. Personally, I don’t think it was a very fair test—I did what I was supposed to, and I still didn’t get my sphere.”

“The point is irrelevant now,” Elorin said, shaking his head. “The Path, or at least the Path as we know it, is no more.”

Kenton flexed his shoulder, feeling the pain of his gash. He had always wondered what happened in the rare cases when a mastrell died while running the Path. “I’m going to have to agree with Traiben,” he decided, wincing in pain. “I know it hasn’t killed anyone in decades, but we’re still probably better off without it.”

“And you will be remembered as the one who defeated the Path,” Traiben said with a congratulatory smile. “And an acolent, no less!”

“Kenton,” Elorin said, looking at his shoulder with concerned eyes. “Perhaps you should… stay back and rest today.”

“What?” Traiben said, his face shocked. “Elorin, how could you even suggest such a thing?”

Kenton frowned as well. It was an odd suggestion. All sand masters, except those left behind to watch the Diem, were expected to attend the ceremony—no matter what their state of health.

“I apologize, mastrell,” Elorin said immediately. “It was a thoughtless suggestion.”

“I mean, today of all days!” Traiben continued. “After what you did, Kenton, the Lord Mastrell will *have* to make you a mastrell.”

“My father doesn’t *have* to do anything,” Kenton said with a

shake of his head. “In fact, knowing him, I’ll bet he’s less likely to make me a mastrell after what I did yesterday.”

“What?” Traiben asked incredulously.

“Praxton is very concerned with image,” Kenton explained with a sigh, seating himself back on his cot. “The more I protest his decisions, the more he’s going to resist giving me what I want. If he were to grant me mastrellship now, it would mean admitting defeat in front of the entire Diem.”

“But…” Traiben asked uncertainly.

“Why do I keep trying?” Kenton finished. Then he shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know. I’m not even convinced that I deserve to be a mastrell. Maybe an undermastrell or a lesstrell. I’d probably even be happy as a fen, except…”

“Except?”

“Except I just can’t force myself to let Praxton win,” Kenton admitted with a wry smile. He had argued with his father for eight years now, always claiming he deserved to be a mastrell. Kenton had stopped believing his own assertions years ago—now that he knew more about sand mastery, now that he had lost his child’s innocence, he had learned to accept that he just didn’t have as much power as others. His one ribbon, no matter how cleverly used, couldn’t match a mastrell’s two dozen.

But, he still kept fighting. Even though he didn’t really think he deserved to be a mastrell, he claimed he did. “I guess I’m too much like him,” Kenton mumbled. “It isn’t the rank that bothers me; it’s his acknowledgement of what I’ve done. Of what I am.”

Elorin laid a comforting hand on Kenton’s shoulder. “You should rest now, acolent. Be assured, we will wake you in time for the ceremonies.”

Kenton nodded, laying back on the cot. He did not, however, let them place the damp cloth on his forehead again. Instead, he let himself drift to sleep in the comforting warmth of daylight.

“Is it true, what they say about Drile?” Dirin asked with a hushed, excited tone.

“I don’t know,” Kenton admitted, walking through the camp of tents toward the place for the advancement ceremonies. True to his word, Elorin had sent Dirin to wake Kenton at the proper time. The moon hung just to the southeast, marking the approach of tenth

hour.

“They say Drile was caught making plans to sell his powers,” Dirin continued. “They say he was gathering a group of sand masters to hire out as mercenaries.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” Kenton mumbled. Drile. It was rare enough for a group of students to produce one mastrell, but Kenton’s had produced two. Drile was even more powerful than Traiben—in fact, there were those who whispered he was stronger than Praxton himself. And the worst thing was, Drile knew exactly how good he was.

“Do you think… do you think they’ll kick him out of the Diem?” Dirin asked with a hushed tone.

“Maybe,” Kenton said. It had happened before, but not in centuries, and never to one so powerful. “That will be up to the Lord Mastrell, won’t it?”

“I suppose so,” Dirin agreed, falling to his own contemplations.

The ceremonies were always held in the same place, a flat plain of sand. There were cliffs visible in the distance—they surrounded wide plain, like the lip of a crater. Kenton and Dirin left the campsite behind, walking out onto the edge of the plain, where a group of white-robed forms was already gathering.

The sand masters milled together, for the most part remaining self-segregated by the colors of their sashes. The gold Mastrells were at the front, with a group of yellow undermastrells to the side. Lestrells in black, underlestrells in gray, Diemfens in brown, fens in tan, and underfens in cream. And, of course, the acolents, who stood in smaller groups, staying with those their same year. There were about two thousand of them all together.

Kenton approached the back of the crowd, letting Dirin drift off to join the other acolents. Of them all, only Kenton had no place. Every member of his acolent group had been advanced four years previously, leaving Kenton to attend increasingly redundant classes with acolents who seemed to get younger every year.

He got numerous looks as he walked amongst them, most encouraging, but none accepting. Kenton was alone in the Diem. He knew some of the others, especially the lower ranks, respected him. He also knew that many sand masters—regardless of rank—disliked him. Even as he passed a group of acolents, he heard muffled

snickers and comments. The students generally mocked their odd, over-aged companion. Young as they were, that hadn't yet been forced to deal with advancement, and the limit on their potential it would proclaim.

This day, however, more of the faces seemed comraderous than normal. More than one bid him *traid'ka*, a Kershtian word to suggest good fortune. Kenton walked through them, smiling at those he knew, generally impressed by the level of support he felt. *Well,* he determined, *I may not have managed to convince the only one who matters, but at least the rest of them agree with me.*

The cliffs in the distance were to far away to provide cover, and so the ever-prevalent wind couldn't be excluded from the gathering. It blew softly this day, whipping through the crowd like an unpleasant guest, tugging at robes and swirling small cones of sand. Kenton's optimism faded as he worked his way through a group of lestrells to stand at the front of the crowd. Lord Mastrell Praxton, his eyes hard enough to subdue even the wind, sat, surrounded by a half-circle of mastrells.

The chair, crafted completely of wood, was really more like a throne, though kings hadn't been seen in Lossand since the beginning of the *Taishin* era several centuries before. Praxton huddled in the massive chair like a sandling, his thin, spindly arms more like feelers than arms. His face displayed as much emotion as a chitenous shell.

Kenton walked to the side of the crowd, standing off by himself. Despite their overtures of friendship, none of the sand masters invited him to join them. In many ways, the lower ranks were just as exclusive as the higher ones. Perhaps Elorin or Traiben would have done otherwise, but they were required to stand with the Lord Mastrell. The undermastrells were already taking their places, forming a larger semi-circle behind the mastrells. The rest of the groups began to quiet, standing in their separate ranks as they waited for the ceremony to begin.

Kenton frowned as he watched. There was something wrong. Silently, Kenton searched for what was bothering him. The hushed sound of whispers ran through the crowd of sand masters—they had noticed it too. There were only seventeen mastrells standing behind Praxton—three were missing.

Where's Drile? Kenton realized. Kenton shook his head in amazement—despite his words, he hadn't really believed Drile capable of something so revolting. Sand masters were one cohesive whole, regulated by the Diem. If smaller groups began selling their services like common tradesmen, chaos would soon be the result. For all of Kenton's grievances with the Diem—and there were many—he had never once thought of selling his powers elsewhere.

The mumbling grew louder near the back of the crowd, and Kenton turned. A pair of mastrells were leading a tall, brown-haired man through the group. Firm-featured with thin, knowing lips and a lean build, Drile represented all that a sand master was supposed to be: powerful, controlling, and arrogant. He walked indifferently through the ranks, as if he were striding before a group of subjects, not being taken under guard to his own trial.

At the front of the crowd he paused briefly, turning eyes on the gathered sand masters. The mastrells behind him froze, uncertain what to do. Drile was more powerful than any other living sand master, save maybe for Praxton himself. If Drile decided to run, then the struggle to restrain him could potentially turn dangerous. Fortunately, Kenton was certain there was one law even Drile would not break. No sand master was allowed to use his skills to hurt another of their kind—it was an injunction as old as the sands themselves.

Drile regarded the Diem for a moment, still smiling. *Don't feign horror before me,* his look said. *I know you. You created me*. The Diem—its arrogance, its wastefulness—is what had led Drile to become what he was. Drile might have been the one to take the conceit one step further, but that was only because the rest of them assumed they couldn't get away with it.

Drile spun and approached the mastrells, his guards following like retainers. The crowd hushed once again as Praxton spoke.

"Drile, what have you done?" he asked with a tired voice. Despite his age, Praxton's words still carried, loud enough to be heard by those at the front of the crowd.

Drile did not answer.

Praxton sighed. "You may go," he said to the guards. The two mastrells bowed and took their places with the rest of their rank.

"Take your place, Drile," Praxton ordered. "You're still a

mastrell."

Drile complied with a curt bow, walking over to stand at the head of the mastrells.

"Let us begin," Praxton said, nodding to Elorin.

The undermastrell, foremost of his rank, bowed in reply. He knelt and freed his *qido* from his belt, pouring its contents into an earthen bowl. This he handed to Praxton, who drank a sip and handed it back. Elorin accepted the bowl, then stood uncertainly for a moment, his eyes apprehensive for some reason. Then, apparently deciding that tradition held even in the face of irregularity, he carried the bowl over and handed it to Drile.

Drile snorted to himself, taking the bowl. He held it for just a second, his eyes meeting those of Praxton. Then, without taking a drink, he handed it to the sand master beside him. Kalmeer accepted the bowl hesitantly, but eventually regained his poise and took a sip before handing it to the next in line. The bowl moved through the mastrells, then back to the undermastrells, before Elorin accepted it once more and carried it back to Praxton. With one final sip, Praxton officially initiated the advancement ceremonies.

Elorin walked over, refilling the bowl and handing it to the first line of watching sand masters. They began to drink, each one taking a sip and handing it to his neighbor, refilling it from their *qidoin* when necessary.

The ceremony, however, didn't need to wait for everyone to drink. As soon as Elorin had given away the bowl, he picked up a sack from beside Praxton's chair and removed several colored sashes from within. Kenton squinted, counting. There were seven—none of them gold. There would be no new mastrells this day. Elorin accepted a thin scroll from the Lord Mastrell and took a few steps forward. He unrolled the scroll and read with a loud voice.

"Reendel, son of Craftsman Keshdel," Elorin announced. A white-sashed youth stepped forward from the back of the crowd, approaching Praxton's chair on nervous legs.

"You have been offered the rank of underlesstrell," Elorin informed. "Take the sash and be advanced."

Reendel reached forward a trembling hand and accepted the gray sash from the Lord Mastrell. "Congratulations," Praxton said in

a flat, unconcerned voice.

Elorin proceeded, reading the names of Reendel's acolent group. Kenton took a sip from the bowl as it reached him, frowning at the salty taste. Whoever had refilled the bowl last hadn't been carrying very good water.

Each boy stepped forward as his name was called, accepting a different sash from Praxton. Only one placed higher than the first—a scrawny boy who was given the black of a lesstrell. It was an average group—undermastrells and mastrells were rare.

Finally, only one sash remained in Praxton's hand: a brown one. Kenton regarded it with trepidation. *Brown. The rank of Diemfen*. It was about midway through the Diem's hierarchy, with three ranks below it and four above.

The sash was obviously meant for Kenton—there had only been six acolents in this year's group. A Diemfen was no mastrell, but it was higher than Kenton had ever realistically thought he would be offered. Despite himself, Kenton found his mood begin to brighten. Part of his heart warned that he was giving up, that he was settling for less than he deserved. The rest, however—the logical, realistic side—realized that he had made his statement, and had succeeded. There would be no more to be gained from pointless resistance.

Surprisingly, the next name Elorin called was not Kenton's. "Drile, mastrell of the Diem," Elorin announced.

Drile stepped out of line. His eyes were calm—he had been expecting this.

Elorin looked back at Praxton with a question on his face.

"Read it," Praxton croaked.

"Drile, you have been offered the rank of Diemfen," Elorin all but whispered. "Take the sash, and be unadvanced."

Kenton blinked in surprise, and the crowd immediately began to buzz with conversation. Never, in all the history of the Diem, had a sand master been *un*advanced. It was unheard of.

Drile looked down at the sash in Praxton's hand with stunned eyes. He had probably expected a reprimand of some sort, perhaps even formal expulsion from the Diem. But to be forced into a lower rank… that was a humiliation greater even than being kicked out.

"I don't trust you, Drile," Praxton informed. "If I expelled you, I doubt you would obey the Law and refrain from using your powers.

This way I can still keep an eye on you."

Drile continued to stare at the sash, his handsome face confused. "I…" To stay in the Diem would mean humiliation, but he would still be able to use his powers. Drile reached out, but then lowered his hand without accepting the sash. He looked up with determination, meeting Praxton's eyes.

From his place at the head of the crowd, Kenton could see the look that passed between them. A contest of power, no less great than that of crashing waves or battling swordsmen. Drile stood, his lips slightly parted, as if prepared to denounce Praxton's offer and take expulsion instead of humiliation.

The Lord Mastrell's stare quelled him. Slowly, Drile's face seemed to grow wan before Praxton's harsh eyes. His determination faltered, his rebelliousness weakened, as Praxton made use of the talent that had gained him the position of Lord Mastrell—a talent that had nothing to do with mastering sand. Drile was defeated by a force that wasn't mystical or arcane, but one that had been used by humankind since its birth. More than his ability as a sand master, more than his haughty air, it was Praxton's sheer willpower that made him such a great leader.

With a limp hand, Drile took the sash from Praxton's outstretched hand. As the former mastrell stood looking at the sign of his defeat, Praxton reached out, whipping the gold mastrell's sash off Drile's waist and dropping it to the ground.

"Go join your rank, Diemfen," Praxton ordered.

Head bowed, Drile turned, shuffling across the sand in a stunned daze, as if unable to believe what he had just done.

Kenton frowned. If the brown sash had been for Drile… Even as he watched, Kenton watched his father retrieve something from the pouch at his side. A sash. A cream-colored sash.

No! Kenton thought with sharp disappointment.

"Kenton, son of Praxton, step forward," Elorin said, reading from the scroll. The undermastrell's voice shook with sympathy.

Kenton stepped forward, trying to control his emotions. For some reason, this blow took him harder than any before. He had been ready to give in, prepared to accept the compromise of Diemfen. He approached the Lord Mastrell's seat with a slow step, resting a comforting hand on Elorin's shoulder as he passed.

“You thought it was for you, didn’t you?” Praxton asked with a slight smile as Kenton bowed.

Feeling sick, Kenton did not reply.

“I told you yesterday, I would offer you fen *if* you agreed not to run the Path. Why would I reward you for disobeying me?”

“I…” Kenton mumbled. “I was fooling myself, I guess.”

“You slew the *Marken*,” Praxton continued. “Because you disobeyed me, the Path has been ruined. For the rest of time, the Diem will remember you as the one who deprived others from running the Path.”

Kenton sighed, looking down at the sash in Praxton’s hand.

“You don’t even deserve this,” the Lord Mastrell informed, his voice growing quiet. “But I offer it to you this one last time. Accept your place as underfen. Reject it, and I will expel you from the Diem. I will not continue to allow you to make a mockery of this ceremony.”

Praxton thrust the sash toward him. *You don’t even deserve this…* The words were true; Kenton had never belonged in the Diem. He had forced them to accept him when they didn’t want to, had demanded that they give him attention he didn’t deserve, and cried injustice when he was offered the ranks he had earned.

I’m tired of fighting, he realized with weariness. *Tired of the hostility, the awkwardness, and the laughter.*

Resigned, he looked up, reaching out to take the sash. And then he met Praxton’s eyes. Praxton’s demanding, intolerant eyes. The eyes of his father, a man who had lived apart from his family, like all sand masters. A man Kenton had never known. If there had been a leak of concern in that wall of a face, Kenton would have taken the sash.

“No,” he felt himself whisper, his hand falling back to his side. “I won’t be beaten down, father. I’ve proven myself worthy of more.”

“You are certain you want to do this?” Praxton asked flatly.

“Yes,” Kenton said with growing resolve.

“Then I have no other choice left,” Praxton said with a sigh. “Kenton, son of Praxton, I grant you the rank of mastrell.”

Kenton froze, stupefied. The Lord Mastrell nodded down to the sand at the base of his chair where a fluttering piece of gold was half-buried in the wind-blown sand. Drile’s sash.

“Take it,” Praxton ordered.

“But, why?” Kenton asked with amazement.

“Take it,” Praxton commanded again.

Dumbfounded, Kenton complied, reaching down to pull the length of cloth from the sand.

“Turn around,” Praxton commanded.

Kenton did so, his mind still stunned by what had just happened. What he was about to see confused him even further. He stared into the eyes of two thousand faces, and instead of joy or congratulations, he felt a single, overpowering emotion. Jealousy.

The sand masters looked as confused as he, but their emotion had an edge of hostility—of hatred. Even as Kenton watched, the wind-whipped golden sash writhing in his hands, the faces grew increasingly dark.

“Have you learned nothing of the Diem during your years here, boy?” Praxton hissed behind him “Yes, they supported you when you were the victim, but that was when they thought you were below them. No one ever thought you would actually succeed.”

Kenton turned, shielding his eyes from the mass of animosity behind him. His shocked eyes fell back on his father, who was shaking his aged head in sorrow.

“You think I hated you, boy? I was trying to protect you. Right now every single one of them is thinking to himself, ‘why was Kenton made a mastrell when I was not?’ And they are all coming to the same conclusion.”

“Because I’m your son,” Kenton whispered with growing horror.

Praxton nodded slowly. “You will find no peace in this rank, child, only hatred. The mastrells will think you unworthy of them, the lower ranks will be envious of your favored position. You could have had purpose and fellowship in one of the lower ranks—you, more than anyone else, should have known how pointless a title is. What would it have mattered if people called you underfen instead of mastrell? Would that have altered your power, made you any less capable?”

“No,” Kenton whispered, the word more of a cry of despair than an answer. Despite all of his accusations, his appeals for reform, Kenton had caught the same disease as every other sand master.

“You wanted it, boy,” Praxton hissed, a twisted delight shining

in his eyes. “Well, you can have it. Learn what happens to those who defy me.”

Kenton bowed his head, sash fluttering in his hands. He could hear the whispers beginning behind him—whispers of outrage. He had thought being an acolent had been hard. He hadn’t understood…

He looked up, his eyes seeking for some sort of sympathy from his father. Praxton stared back flatly, his eyes dull. Almost like they weren’t looking at him at all.

Only then did Kenton notice the arrow sticking out of his father’s side.

Screams flew into the air behind him and Kenton spun in concern. Tan-clothed forms poured over the short cliffs behind the sand masters—they must have snuck up through the camp. Arrows were falling from bowmen in the back ranks. The crowd of sand masters, confused and frightened, stood in mass as the arrows descended on them.

“Kershtians!” one of the mastrells screamed, calling sand to life.

Kenton cursed, dropping to the ground and grabbing a handful of sand. He rolled to his feet, whipping his sword out with the other hand. All around him sand masters were mastering sand, dashing about in a chaotic mixture of bodies and glowing sand. Some darted into the air, though where they were jumping, Kenton didn’t know. Others called up massive walls in front of themselves to block the arrows. Still others didn’t seem to know what to do, standing uncertainly with ribbons of sand hovering around them.

It doesn’t make sense! Kenton thought to himself with confusion. Lossand hadn’t had a war with the Kershtians for centuries. True, they hated the Diem, but they were also supposed to fear sand mastery to the point of irrationality. What could have convinced them to attack such a large group?

Kenton pushed speculation aside, dashing forward. Regardless of their motives, the Kershtians were doing surprisingly well in the battle. Sand mastery was the most dangerous weapon on the sands, but its practitioners hadn’t needed to defend themselves in hundreds of years. The sand masters fought as individuals, sending their ribbons against random Kershtians. The olive-skinned warriors were taking heavy losses, but they were advancing as their superior

numbers allowed them to take down the sand masters one at a time.

Unfortunately, most of the sand masters had decided to call up walls of sand to protect themselves—a method that also prevented them from seeing their enemies. The Kershtians easily ducked around the sides of the sand walls, attacking the unprepared sand masters with their bolts. Those who were powerful enough had made rings of sand around themselves instead, but that left them totally cut off from the battle—leaving the less powerful to fend for themselves.

Kenton ran into the affray, whipping his sand to life. A Kershtian took sight of him, raising the tube-like *zinkall* on his arm. With a flick of his wrist, the warrior released the *zinkall*'s air pressure, launching an arrow at Kenton's heart.

Kenton waved his hand, and his sand obeyed, slapping the arrow out of the air. Then he snapped his finger forward with a sharp motion, drilling the ribbon of sand directly through the Kershtian's forehead. The sand fell dead a moment after it touched blood, but a moment was all that was necessary.

Another Kershtian was on him a moment later, wielding a spear whose tip was fashioned from sandling carapace. Kenton brushed the attack aside with his sword, and the Kershtian looked down with surprise, as if noticing the weapon for the first time. Kenton's blade took him in the chest before he realized that this sand master, at least, had more than one weapon at his disposal.

Kenton paused. Something was wrong—wrong with the warriors. Their foreheads all bore 'X'-shaped scars. *That's not right,* Kenton thought. Some Kershtians wore scars on their foreheads, but…

He dropped the line of reasoning, however, as he saw several sand masters a short distance away. "Not like that!" Kenton yelled at the group of lestrells who were trying to defend themselves with walls of sand. Kenton reached forward, using his sand to grab an arrow out of the air just before it hit one of the lestrells in the chest.

The young man, barely sixteen years old, looked down at the bolt with a pale face.

"Use ribbons," Kenton urged, "not walls. Don't leave yourself vulnerable."

"I…" the boy mumbled. "I couldn't catch one like that!"

Kenton cursed, blocking another arrow. “You two,” he said, pointing at two of the lestrells. “Watch for Kershtians that are aiming at us, and throw up a wall in front of *them* not us. You two, attack. Understand?”

The four lestrells, three of them far older than Kenton, obeyed without a question, fear in their eyes. Kershtians began to fall as Kenton gathered other sand masters, adding them to the four lestrells and creating a ring of organized sand masters.

As he worked, however, he thought on the impossibility of what was happening. Even surprised, even unorganized, the sand masters should easily have defeated their foes. Something was wrong. Kenton scanned the battlefield, which was scattered with bodies, blood, and blackened sand. All of the rings of protective sand had fallen for some reason, and the sand masters in sight—especially the mastrells and undermastrells—seemed to be in pain for some reason, even the ones who were unharmed.

Then Kenton realized what it was. His throat was sharply dry, his breath starting to come painfully. He was running out of water. *But, I’ve only been mastering for a few minutes!* He thought incredulously. He could go a half-hour without a drink, longer if he didn’t do anything strenuous. He couldn’t argue with his body, however, which was warning him he had wasted too much water.

A short distance away he saw Traiben holding his face in agony. “Traiben!” Kenton yelled, rushing to his friend’s side. Traiben stumbled as Kenton arrived, looking up as he dropped to the sand. Kenton froze in horror. Where Traiben’s eyes had been there were now two dry, empty sockets. Overmastery had set in—Traiben had sucked the water out of his own eyes.

“No!” Kenton yelled lifting Traiben’s head to stare into the sightless sockets. Even the newest sand master knew how to control himself well enough not to do such a thing. Traiben’s skin flaked beneath Kenton’s hands, cracking and splitting.

This is impossible! Kenton thought, clutching his friend’s body. *This isn’t just overmastery, this is insanity! Why would they go so far?*

Traiben tried to speak, but his tongue was a limp, dried strip in his mouth. Kenton quickly pulled out his *qido*, pouring its contents into the fallen mastrell’s mouth. Then, uncertain what else to do, he

pulled Traiben back to the ring of sand masters he had formed, setting the wounded man in their center. Then he looked up with concern at the sand masters around him.

When he had left them moments ago, the group had been doing well. That was changing quickly, however. Men were falling to the ground, doubled over in unseen agony, others holding their faces or their chests.

They're all overmastering! Kenton thought with alarm. He cast aside his amazement, forcing his confused, frightened mind to focus in their predicament. They needed water. There were stores of it back in the camp a short distance away.

"Wait here!" Kenton yelled to the group. "Master as little as possible to defend yourselves; I'll return with water."

Those that could hear him nodded, their eyes wild with panic. Kenton raced through the line of men, attacking a Kershtian with his sword, his movements desperate. Realistically, he knew their chances were slim. He couldn't see a single mastrell or undermastrell still standing—in fact, a good half of the white-robed forms on the plain were immobile.

Still, he fought, slaying the Kershtian with a scream of anger. He whipped his sand forward, slicing it through the chests of three archers in a row before letting it die, lest it drain him of water. Even as he did so, three more Kershtians moved in to surround him, their short-hafted spears long enough to keep him from getting close enough to strike with his sword. He took a breath, preparing to reach for another handful of sand, when he heard a bellow of rage.

The scream surged across the plain, drawing attention of both sand master and Kershtian. Back where the battle had begun, beside the fallen throne, stood a form in a golden sash, an arrow sticking from his side. Praxton. Not dead after all.

The ancient mastrell's eyes were wild with anger as he roared, raising his hands above his head. The sand at his feet rumbled, then exploded with light, shining like a second sun. A column of sand fully thirty-feet in diameter rose up around him, swirling and pulsing like one of the horrible storms that sometimes struck the coast.

Suddenly, the column shot outward, thinning into a wide disk,

spreading like a ripple on a pond. The slammed into Kershtians, spraying gore as it sliced them in half. It moved blindingly quick, sheering bodies, hitting most of them before they realized they were in danger. It split where it encountered white robes, however, leaving sand masters unharmed.

Dozens of Kershtians fell to the sands before the wave of sand. Praxton continued to scream, ribbons of sand to dancing and twisting twist around him. There was an edge to his screams now, however, an edge of pain. The Kershtians around Kenton dashed away as the wave approached. Then, however, it faltered, its glow dimming. Finally it pulsed one last time, and fell to the ground as a wide ring of black.

The plain was quiet for a calm moment. Then Kershtians began to call to one another, and their force regrouped, reloading their *zinkallin* and organizing for a final assault. There were only a few hundred of them left, but the sand masters they faced were tired and overmastered. White-robbed forms slumped across the sand, waiting in a daze as the Kershtians began to advance once again.

"Get up!" Kenton encouraged, his voice frantic. The Kershtian archers, noting him as one of the few standing, took aim and Kenton froze, staring down no less than a dozen bowmen. Even he couldn't block that many arrows.

Praxton's wail had turned high pitched. The sound floated across the plain like an inhuman, ghostly thing. Dozens of archers took aim at the Lord Mastrell, letting loose their arrows. At the very same time, the archers aiming at Kenton released their missiles.

Kenton jumped, intent on rolling to the ground, but he knew he was too late. Some arrows would miss, but too many would fly true. He ducked his head, turning away from the oncoming arrows.

His eyes fell on Praxton. The mighty sand master stood as if oblivious to the death approaching him. Instead, he ordered his sand forward. Toward Kenton. Every last grain under the Lord Mastrell's control burst forth, racing the arrows. A dozen shafts pierced Praxton's body, but still he held onto his sand.

Praxton's sand enveloped Kenton, blocking the arrows that would have claimed his life. As Kenton watched, blinking against the sand, Praxton's form fell limp. As it did so, his sand stopped shining—and fell directly on top of Kenton.

He tried to call out, but rough sand choked him, buried him, pressed against him. The darkness claimed Kenton for the second time that day. There, in total blackness, Kenton fell unconscious.

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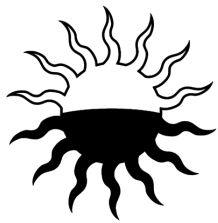


"I think that merchant over-charged us," Khriss informed, making a final notation on her ledger. The beetle-like riding beast—called a tonk—swayed beneath her, moving in its unhurried, rhythmic way. She had been scared to climb on one at first, but they were really quite docile. She had even gotten used to the faint sulfurous smell they gave off.

"Really?" Cynder asked in an unconcerned voice, his tonk walking beside her own. "What makes you think so?"

"I used some of the change he gave us to buy a loaf of bread in that last town," she explained. "You can tell a lot about a society's economic system from how much a loaf of bread costs." Closing the ledger, she reached over and stuffed it in her tonk's saddlebags, pulling out a small pouch instead. From inside she removed several stone discs, shaped like thick coins.

"This gray one seems to be worth the least," she explained, leaning over to hand Cynder the coin. The dark spectacles made his expression difficult to read, so she couldn't tell if he was actually interested, or just playing along. Of course, even without the glasses, it was hard to tell if Cynder were serious or not.

"Fascinating," the balding professor said, turning the smooth stone coin over in his fingers.

"I think the marble ones are next in line," Khriss continued,

“then the white ones, the gold ones, then the metallic silver ones.”

“You figured this all out by buying a loaf of bread?” Cynder asked, tossing the coin back to her.

“That, and how much the merchant charged us for the supplies,” Khriss said, repacking the coins.

“Who would have thought a loaf of bread could be so useful?” Cynder mumbled, chuckling softly to himself.

Khriss frowned, trying to decide if he’d made a joke or not, then simply shook her head. Cynder’s sense of humor was beyond the comprehension of ordinary mortals.

“I could have told you he over-charged us,” Baon said, moving his tonk up next to hers. The large, dark warrior was adapting very quickly to the strange Dayside beetle-horses. Somehow, he could get his tonk to obey commands, while Khriss’s own creature—which she had dubbed ‘Stump’ because the largest of his horns was broken halfway down—seemed incapable of doing anything besides following the rest of the group.

Khriss shot Baon a questioning look. “You know the monetary system?”

Baon shook his head, snorting softly to himself. “Really, duchess. Did you expect him not to cheat us? He’s the only one who spoke our language—I expect he made quite a profit off of those gems we traded him. And rightly so. It must have taken quite a bit of effort on his part to learn Dynastic.”

“That’s one way to look at it, I supposed,” Khriss said without conviction.

Over the last week of riding, Khriss had almost convinced herself that she was getting used to the heat. She wore a wide-brimmed hat she had purchased in one of the towns, along with a white dayside dress that was surprisingly thick—she would have thought dayside clothing would be thinner than darkside varieties. However, the thick clothing actually felt cooler than the thin darkside dress she had worn in the town.

Despite the clothing and hat, she could feel the sun burning above her, its heat baking her skin. It had risen slowly in the sky as they moved to the southwest, and seemed to grow increasingly powerful the more lofty it became. She hadn’t realized how much she was capable of sweating.

The others were doing little better. Acron had abandoned his darkside clothing at the first opportunity, and draped in white robes like he now was, he resembled a bale of cloth. Baon had bought himself a white robe as well, though he had made a few alterations, and wore it more like a coat, providing easy access to his sword and pistols underneath. Other than that, he wore a pair of nondescript trousers and a tight white shirt. Only Cynder insisted on maintaining his traditional dress—for some reason, the heat didn't seem to affect him. He still wore his three-piece suit with the long tails and stiff vest.

Fortunately, there seemed to be a constant wind here on Dayside, and it helped alleviate some of the heat. However, the wind carried with it problems of its own—thousands of them, in the form of tiny sand grains.

The sand seemed to get into everything. It wiggled between her lips, blew into her eyes, and worked its way underneath her clothing. It was so fine it was almost like powder, but it still had the gritty roughness of sand. Since the day they had left that first town a week ago, Khriss hadn't seen a single bit of stone or dirt—nothing but endless dunes of white sand.

"Town up ahead," Baon informed, lowering the spyglass from his eye. Of their group, he was the only one who no longer wore the darkened spectacles.

"Doesn't the light hurt your eyes?" Khriss asked curiously as he leaned over to hand her the spyglass. She gripped the reins of her tonk tightly and leaned over to accept it.

"Yes," Baon said simply.

"Well, why not wear the spectacles?"

"They are a disadvantage I'd distance myself from as soon as possible," he informed. Then, nodding ahead, he continued, "Do you want to stop?"

Khriss scanned the town through the glass. It looked much like the other towns they had passed, though it was on the small side.

"Not unless you can think of a way to refill our water," she finally replied.

Baon shrugged. "I can try," he said, moving his tonk forward until he was riding next to their guide—a young boy of perhaps fourteen years named Indan. He was one of the olive-skinned

natives that formed the predominant part of the population in the towns they had passed. The merchant had promised that Idan would be able to lead them to the nation of Lossand—despite the fact that he didn't speak a word of Dynastic.

Khriss reached into her saddlebags, pulling free a folded sheet of paper. The map had been copied from a Darkside book, and hardly seemed accurate. However, using the enormous mountain visible in the distance as a guide, she guessed they had only crossed about a third of the distance to their destination. Their water was already halfway gone.

Their inability to communicate with Indan was proving to be a major difficulty in this one important area: water. Khriss had assumed that the Daysider would provide a way for them to fill their water containers when they passed native towns, but so far that had not been the case. In fact, the young boy didn't seemed concerned at all about water—he used it with a level of wastefulness that amazed Khriss. She had read of desert-like areas on Darkside and the people who lived in them. She would have assumed that water would be a precious, almost sacred commodity to these Daysiders.

But, amazingly, they didn't seem to care about it. The tonks never needed refreshment—quite the opposite, in fact. Khriss had spilled some water from her canteen—Indan called it a Kido, or something like that—on the second day. The liquid had burned through her mount's carapace like acid, sending the beast into a pained rage that had tossed her to the ground. Even now, there was a palm-sized hole in the creature's headplate.

But the insect-like tonks were one thing, humans were something completely different. Surely they couldn't survive without water? Their guide certainly drank a lot of it. But, she had yet to see a well or rainbucket in any of the towns they had passed.

This village was no different—a collection of about fifty small tents and several large pens, only one of which held any animals. The beasts were very similar to their bug-like mounts, though they were squatter and didn't have the horns. They Khriss and the others road by, the villagers watching them with a suspicion that was matched by Flennid and the other two nobleman soldiers.

"What a beautiful aboriginal society!" Professor Acron

exclaimed from just up front. “My friends in the anthropology department are going to fits of envy when we tell them about this, Cynder.” The plump man had removed a ledger from his bags, and was attempting—rather unsuccessfully—to scribble notes on it. “Look how primitive they are,” he exclaimed. “Nomads, wouldn’t you say?”

“The tents do seem to imply that, don’t they?” The Cynder agreed.

“Yes, yes,” Acron continued, scribbling. “Perhaps… twelve hundred years behind Elis. What a life it must be—no running water, no carriages, no theater! Though, I guess there must be something to be said for the simple life of a native.”

Acron’s comment earned a quiet snort from ahead, and Khriss looked up to see Baon trotting his mount back toward her. Acron shot a slightly uncomfortable look at the mercenary, then turned back to his notes.

“What?” Khriss demanded as Baon pulled his mount up next to hers.

“Look to your right,” Baon ordered, nodding to the side.

Khriss did as directed, her eyes finding a pair of wary guards that stood at the front of the village. Khriss’s expedition didn’t approach the town, though it had visited others. The villagers and Darksiders were mutually unable to communicate, and though the darksiders’s odd skin usually caused some stir amongst the children, most people paid them little heed. Apparently, these villages weren’t unaccustomed to visitors.

The guards watched them pass, squatting in the shadow of a tent wall. As far as Khriss could tell, there was nothing about them worth noting.

“I give up,” Khriss confessed. “What do you want me to see, Baon?”

“On the arm of the left one,” the warrior said, handing her spyglass. “Look closely.”

Khriss raised the glass to her eye, focusing on the warrior. It was difficult to pick out details in the shade, and she had to watch for a few moments before she saw what Baon was indicating—a strange device was attached to the man’s arm.

It seemed kind of like a shield or buckler, but it wasn’t wide

enough. It seemed to be constructed of carapace, and it was perhaps as wide as a man's palm. It ran all the way up the man's forearm, extending from wrist to elbow. Most interesting, however, was the front of the device. She could see what appeared to be the tips of three arrows sticking out over the daysider's wrist.

"What is it?" Khriss asked.

Baon shook his head. "A weapon of some sort," he guessed. "A crossbow, maybe?"

"But there's no bow," Khriss objected.

Baon just shrugged. "Whatever it is, I've never seen anything like it before."

Khriss raised the spyglass again. The man definitely acted as if the contraption were a weapon. As Khriss watched, one of the men unfolded something from the side of his contraption. It was a long rod that had been hidden under the weapon's lip, and it attached to the weapon near the man's wrist. Khriss watched with curiosity as the man held the far end of the rod and slowly began to pull it away from his arm then press it back down. Almost like he was… pumping.

"Pneumonic?" Khriss asked with surprise, handing the spyglass back to Baon.

"Air-powered crossbows," Baon mumbled.

"They couldn't possibly have a level of technology capable of such a thing," Khriss objected.

"It appears that our primitives aren't quite so primitive," Cynder said from beside her.

Khriss turned with surprise—she'd almost forgotten the linguist was there. "We'll have to find someone else to make us feel superior," Cynder said, smiling to himself, his bushy eyebrows raised contentedly. "Of course, you might also have asked why a group of 'nomads' would bother growing crops."

"Crops?" Khriss asked with surprise, turning back to look at the town, which was not receding in the distance. She hadn't seen any sign of crops—just tent and… the pens. Why would they need so many empty ones? As she looked closer, she could see a couple of men walking about in each pen. They weren't raking or weeding, like farmers would do back on darkside, but they did occasionally squat down to pick at unseen items in the sand.

“They aren’t pens, they’re fields,” she realized. “It just must be early in the growing season.”

“Either that, or the crops never break the surface of the sand,” Cynder said with a shrug. “Perhaps they even grow in layers, one on top of the other—that would explain why the pens are so relatively small. Remember this, My Lady, we are in a world completely foreign from our own. Any assumptions we make are bound to be wrong. Or, at least,” he continued with a quiet chuckle, “so I assume.”

Khriss nodded quietly to herself. *Well, you were right about one thing, my prince. These people aren’t as backward as we’ve always thought. Oh, Gevin…*

“Duchess?” Baon asked, noticing the look on her face.

She started, realizing she hadn’t been paying attention. The town was fading in the distance, and they weren’t any closer to solving their water problem. “I’m sorry, Baon. I was just thinking about the prince.”

“We’ll find him, duchess,” Baon said confidently.

“He was right about so many things, Baon. He said that it wouldn’t be as difficult to cross the Border Ocean as the Dynasty claimed, which it wasn’t. He thought that the daysiders would be more advanced than the university taught, and again he was right. It almost makes me think him might have been right about…”

“The Sand Mages?” Baon finished.

“It’s silly, of course,” Khriss said more forcefully. “Magic and superstition are the crutches of the unlearned, and so I told Prince Gevalden a dozen times over. He still believed, though, no mater what evidence the rest of Elis provided. He had a dream from those foolish stories, an image of mystical warriors that could somehow save us from the Dynasty. And now…”

“We’ll find him,” Baon repeated.

Khriss took a deep breath, forcing herself not to think of Gevin, lest the tears start flowing again. “Of course we will. Now, what did the boy say about water?”

Baon shook his head. “He doesn’t understand. I point at my water bottle, and he thinks I’m offering him a drink. I point at the pack-mounts—and their half-empty jugs—and he only laughs and shakes his head.”

“How much time do we have?” Khriss asked.

“A week, with rationing. But it would be better to deal with it now. Perhaps you or the linguist should speak with him again.”

Khriss sighed. Cynder’s last attempts hadn’t been encouraging. Baon’s comment had not been a suggestion, however—he was worried. And so, therefore, was she.

“All right,” she said. “If, that is, I can get Stump here to speed up.” She shook the reins ineffectually, kicking at the beast’s armored sides.

Baon chuckled to himself.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself,” Khriss retorted, still shaking her reigns in frustration.

“Try the hammer,” Baon suggested.

“Hammer?”

Baon reached under the front of his saddle, pulling out a small hammer, perhaps a foot long, with steel-capped ends. Khriss mimicked the action, and was surprised to find a similar device secured under the upraised lip of her saddle. It was connected to the saddle by a short cloth strap.

“Tap it on the right or left if you want him to turn,” the warrior instructed, demonstrating but snapping his hammer lightly against the side of the beast’s carapace just below the neck. The tonk turned slightly. “The harder you hit, the sharper the turn. If you hit it on the head, it will speed up. Hit it back near your saddle, and it will slow down, depending on the strength of the tap.”

Khriss tested his instructions, and Stump responded alacritously, moving as she commanded. “How did you…?”

Baon smiled. “Observation,” he said, nodding toward Indan. “Something they often fail to teach in that university of yours.”

Khriss tapped the mallet lightly on the back of the beast’s head, causing it to speed up. As she gained on the guide’s tonk, the young boy turned apprehensive eyes her direction. She tapped Stump again as she moved up level with the guide, slowing the beast to match speeds.

Indan watched her with suspicious eyes. Like most of his kind, he had a rather large triangular nose and thick hair that tended to lay stiffly and flat.

Khriss smiled. *“Iresha’takasha Do’Dakasha—”*

"*Aisha!*" the boy swore, his face growing harsh. "*A'Reel Karshad'n Shan'Tershadan!*"

Khriss fell silent before the attack, and sat in resignation as he moved away from her.

With a sudden spasm of strength, Kenton burst into the sunlight. Sand poured off his parched and cracked face, leaving behind confused, delirious eyes. Sand clung to his cheeks, crusted into the wells of his eyes and around his lips. Only half conscious, he immediately fell back with a groan, slumping against the dune in which half of his body was still buried.

Tiny sandlings scuttled away from his body, hiding themselves beneath the sand as they realized their prey wasn't quite dead. As Kenton leaned back, his muddled mind reaching for the bliss of sleep, he felt the burning sun above him, and knew, somehow, that he could not afford to fall unconscious again. He didn't know how long he had spent half-buried in his tomb of sand, but he would not last much longer with his skin exposed to the sun's fury.

Moving with a lethargy born of severe dehydration, Kenton began to struggle. He slowly pulled his body free from the dune, then let himself slide down the slope until he came to a stop at the bottom. His knee bumped something soft. His burning, dried eyes barely recognized it as a body—though it was only recognizable by the white robe and gray sash. Sandlings, ranging from the size of a fist all the way down to dots smaller than a fingernail, feasted on the corpse, chewing away layers of skin as the sun obligingly sucked away the body's deadly water. Most of the corpse had already been reduced to bone.

Kenton turned away—unable to feel sick. He could conceive only one thing: the desire for water. Ignoring the burning sands, Kenton moved on hands and knees in what he hoped direction of the camp. He passed more corpses—hundreds of them, all in white. The Kershtians would have taken their dead for a proper burial in the deep sands. Soon he stopped paying attention to the bodies, moving with a monotonous roteness. He forgot why he was moving. He forgot where he was going. He even forgot why it mattered that he arrive. And so he was completely amazed when, by pure fortune, he crawled into the shade of a tent.

A tiny spark of sentience returned and, with a quiet gasp, he

stumbled over to the far corner of the tent. There, sitting in the regular place, was a small barrel. He pulled the lid free with ragged fingers, and dipped his hand into the cool water beneath. After drinking deeply, he fell unconscious once again.

Khriss traced their trail on the map, which had been penned by one of her personal scribes back in Elis. It was crude and outdated, but it did show their destination. Lossand was a large, triangular nation that ran from nearly the center of the continent to the southern shore. It followed what appeared to be Dayside's only river, and though the nation was long, it probably wasn't more than a few hundred ells wide.

It was the river that interested Khriss. Lossand was bound to be different than the rest of the continent's repetitious dunes and unbroken winds. Where there was a river, the land would be fertile and wet, an extended oasis. It was here that the Sand Mages were said to rule.

The legends were extensive and varied. Some told of mighty sorcerers that granted boons to their supplicants, others warned of devious creatures that gamed with the innocent. None were specific about just what a Sand Mage was, of course. Like tales of fairies and monsters, the legends were unsubstantiated, even ridiculous. They were yarns told to children, though if the truth be known, many adults believed them as well. Adults such as Prince Gevalden.

Somehow, Gevin had managed to convince the court—and his father—that these Sand Mages provided a valid source of aid against the Dynasty. Before the Dynastic blockades segregated the continents five centuries before, Elis and Lossand had been frequent trade partners. The prince had pointed to journals and merchants' accounts, trying to prove that these Sand Mages were, in fact, a reality.

And the court had believed him. Despite logic, despite learning, the king had given his son leave to make the journey. Gevin had been so confident, so convincing, that even Khriss had half-believed him. Of course, that was the way he was. Few people could stand against a determined Gevin—he was the court's most respected politician.

Why didn't you listen to me? Khriss thought, bowing her head. Had Gevin died here, on the sands? Such an outcome was looking

increasingly likely for her own expedition.

No, she decided, *Gevin is too stubborn to have let something as mindless as these sands defeat him. He would have at least made it to Lossand.* Gevin was an accomplished explorer—a few years back, he had even managed to sneak out of Elis and into the heart of Dynastic lands, hiding as a mercenary. He would have been prepared for the desert.

Of course, his expedition had started out much better outfitted than her own. He had been given twenty veteran soldiers to guard him, not a handful of hirelings and novices. His expedition to dayside had been extolled; her own proposed expedition had barely been suffered. She remembered well the senate's reaction when she declared her intention to search for her betrothed. Even the King, who had been hard hit by his son's disappearance, had laughed at the ridiculous notion.

You, child, travel to Dayside? Survive where Gevin failed? Really, Khrissalla, go back to your books.

And here she was, leading a group of men to their deaths. If her map was accurate, they still had over a week to travel, but barely enough water for a few days. The guide, who she had determined must be mad, continued on without care. They hadn't seen one of the small desert villages since that last one a week ago, and sharp water rationings had left the entire group sullen. Only Cynder, with his ineffable wryness, was taking the foreboding circumstances in stride. He actually seemed to find it quite funny that they might die here on the sands, despite all their precautions and water hoarding.

Khriss had one last hope. Her map showed a group of markings that appeared to be stone formations—cliffs or hills of some sort, just below the mountain. Though it was a bit of a detour, she had ordered Indan to take them there. Her limited grasp of geology told her that if there was any hope of locating water, it would be where dirt and rock could be found.

"We're there," Baon informed, looking through the spyglass.

"Shella!" Khriss exclaimed. "Are you serious?"

Baon lowered the spyglass, giving her a flat look.

"Of course you are," Khriss finished sheepishly. "Here, let me see."

Sure enough, she could see very distinctly through the glass that

what appeared to the naked eye as a dark blot on the horizon was, indeed, a line of ragged cliffs. She moved to hand the glass to Cynder, but another hand grabbed it first.

"By the Divine!" Flennid said. "Do you really think there might be water there?"

"If it is anywhere," Khriss said, her lips downturned. Over the last few weeks, the nobleman had stopped using her title. It was a small oversight, but one that would have been an enormous mistake had they been back on Elis. However, out here on the sands, Flennid obviously knew he could get away with the disrespect. Unfortunately, Khriss also knew that she had done little to deserve this man's loyalty. She had led him into the desert with improper provisions—he probably had a right to grumble.

She caught Baon's eye as Flennid called to the other two soldiers, leading them in a gallop—or, at least, the insectile equivalent—toward the rocks.

"You shouldn't let them be so disrespectful," Baon informed.

"I know," Khriss said.

"You're encouraging dissention."

"Well, you don't always use my title," she reminded.

"I know," he said simply. "You shouldn't let me get away with it either."

Khriss sighed, walking over to Stump, who sat huddled in the sand, his legs buried. As she swung on his back, however, his thick legs rose beneath him and he began to waddle forward. Baon said nothing further, climbing on his own mount and following her, as did the two professors and the confused guide.

The cliffs rose like intricate ceramic vases, molded and brushed by the wind's incorporeal hands. Khriss had seen nothing like them on darkside—logically, she knew that their strange, column-like arches and pillars must have been formed by the constant winds. Looking upon their beauty, however, she couldn't shake the sense that the rock's colorful strata had been etched by an intelligent mind.

The group circled for a good half an hour before finding a break in the wall of rock that was wide enough to bring their mounts through. Khriss had hoped to find a plain or plateau on the other side, a place where a natural spring could have been found. Unfortunately, her first glimpse revealed something much less

encouraging.

“Imagine that, more sand,” Cynder noted.

It was a broad white basin, a continuation of the sands they had crossed, though the sheltered plain had created dunes that were much less pronounced. The rock continued in a ring, perhaps the remnants of an enormous volcanic crater. Whatever it been before, it was now filled with the same white grains that saturated every other piece of Dayside’s cursed ground.

Flennid, Torth, and Jeron stood in a disconsolate line near the mouth of the opening. “No water,” Flennid spat quietly, shooting Khriss an accusatory look.

“No water,” Baon agreed, scanning the plain with the spyglass, “but there’s definitely something here.”

“What?” Khriss asked with surprise.

“Specks of color,” Baon informed, passing her the glass. “Ones that don’t fit what we’ve seen in the desert.”

Khriss looked across the plain. She could barely make out what Baon had seen—to her, they only looked like dark marks on the otherwise white plain. They might have just been rocks, she couldn’t say for certain.

“If you say so,” she said, lowering the glass.

“I do,” Baon replied, throwing back the side of his rope and pulling free a pistol. “I assume you want to investigate?”

Khriss paused, then nodded, tapping Stump to move forward. The other soldiers, sensing Baon’s careful wariness, nervously fingered their pistols.

“Put those away,” she ordered curtly. “You won’t need them.”

The three noblemen looked at each other, then tapped their mounts forward, guns still held at the ready.

The ride that followed was nervous to the point of anxiety. Tension was high because of the rationing, and Khriss could see from the look in Flennid’s eyes that if anything so much as squirmed, he would shoot it. Baon’s dots of color resolved as they approached, taking on human shapes. As they got closer, however, they soon realized that even squirming was beyond the forms’ power.

Baon, watching through the glass as they approached, was the first to make the determination. “Dead bodies,” he announced

quietly. “Hundreds of them.”

“*Ridos*,” Flennid swore silently, growing even more nervous as he scanned around the crater’s rim.

“Looks like they’ve been dead for some time,” Baon continued. Then, almost hesitantly, he added, “Duchess, you might want to stay back.”

“I can handle dead bodies, captain,” she informed with more resolve than she felt.

“I don’t know that I can,” Acron confessed, wiping his brow with a dirty handkerchief.

“Come, now, Jon,” Cynder said encouragingly. “Weren’t you the one who was so excited to experience the ‘simple life of a primitive?’ I suppose nothing could be more simple than this.”

Baon ignored them both, climbing off his mount as they approached the first body. It was mostly buried in the sand, the only clue of its existence a piece of cloth that had once been white. Dried with blood and crusted with sand, it was easy to tell that the poor soul hadn’t died of natural causes.

Baon approached with a firm step, sliding his thin longsword out of its sheath and using it to pull the rest of the corpse from its shallow sand grave. Khriss gasped in disgust as a group of tiny black insects scuttled away from the body, leaving behind a corpse that was mostly bone.

“No weapons,” Baon noted, continuing to pull the body free. “No armor either, just a robe.” There was a brief flash of gold from the sand and, curious, Baon dug it out with the point of his sword, uncovering what appeared to be a gold-colored sash.

“*Ry’kensha*!” a sudden voice yelped.

Khriss spun in surprise. Indan sat atop his mount, his eyes wide with fear. Then, suddenly, he grabbed his hammer and spun his beast around, galloping it away from the group. “*Ker’Naisha, Ai’Dakasha Nan’Mashainto!”*

“Oh, Ridos,” Baon swore, dashing toward his own mount, intent on following the frightened boy.

A sudden explosion sounded in the air. Indan slumped in his saddle, then toppled backward onto the white sands. His mount continued forward, oblivious to the fact that it had lost its rider.

Flennid sat, his smoking pistol held clutched in shaking fingers,

staring at the dead guide. A second later Baon tore the nobleman from his saddle.

“Boy, you are an idiot!” the mercenary informed, slamming Flennid back against the mount’s hard carapace. The pistol slid from stunned fingers.

“I… I thought he was going for help,” the nobleing stuttered. “That he’d led us into a trap.”

Baon held Flennid for a moment, his eyes wide with anger. Then he sighed, dropping the boy to the sands. Flennid sat shaking as Baon retrieved the fallen pistol and slid it into his belt. “I hope to the Divine that map of yours is accurate,” he mumbled to Khriss as he climbed atop his mount and galloped in the direction of the fallen guide.

“Recognize this?” Baon asked, holding up a large piece of what appeared to be tonk carapace. There were thin wooden tubes extending from its sides, however, and several bulbous chambers underneath. The front of the contraption held three thin carapace tubes, the ends of which just barely jutted out from underneath the dome-like shield on the top.

The weapon, however, was hardly in good condition—even ignorant of its workings, Khriss could tell that much. Several of the tubes had been torn out, and there was a large crack running across its carapace top. All three of the chambers underneath bore similar spider-web crackings.

“I assume it’s one of the weapons we saw earlier,” Khriss noted. They had found a collection of tents in a sheltered hollow at the back of the plain. Most of the tents were void of anything useful, but, thankfully, a few held barrels of stale water. She had sent Flennid and the others to search through the camp for supplies, and left Baon to investigate the field of bodies. Indan’s wound had been, unfortunately, fatal. It felt odd to Khriss, using the habitation of what must belong to one of the corpses on the field, but it made more sense than erecting their own tents.

“Right,” the mercenary agreed, dropping an arrow on tent’s table. It was long—like an arrow fired from a bow, rather than a crossbow. The tip, however, was cylindrical, rather than flat like a regular arrowhead, and it had a small plug behind it that fit the size of the weapon’s tubes.

“There aren’t very many of them,” Baon continued, “though from what I can tell—which isn’t much, considering the level of decomposition—most of those people were either killed by arrows like these or longer ones, probably fired from a regular bow.”

“And is it really fired by air pressure?” Cynder asked. The older professor sat on a stool to Khriss’ left, rubbing his chin with interest. Acron, however, was stooped over on the other side of the tent, inspecting the contents of a small chest beside the wall.

Baon shrugged. “I don’t know how it works, professor. The broken piece on the side does look like a pump, however.”

Cynder shook his head in thought. “I still find it hard to believe that the people on this side of the world have the technology to create the seals and valves that would be required of such a weapon.”

“Try and find us one that isn’t broken,” Khriss requested, accepting the device from Baon.

“I’ll try, duchess,” Baon said without conviction. “There isn’t much left besides bodies. There aren’t even very many arrows. I would guess arrows like these—or, rather, the wood to make them—is scarce, which would explain why most of them were recovered by the victors.”

“But they left these tents alone,” Khriss noted. The tents had been blown by winds, but there were no signs of their being searched—the fact that a few contained water proved that much.

“True,” Baon agreed. “Regardless, the arrows are gone. None of the fallen men have weapons on them. Either their weapons were gathered by the victors, or they never had them in the first place.”

“Why wouldn’t they have had weapons?” Acron asked. With a disrespect for the dead that appalled Khriss, the stoopy professor had confiscated a robe from the room’s chest, and was cutting it into spare handkerchiefs.

“You’re the one who is always talking about primitive cultures, professor,” Baon said. “Primitive people don’t fight the same way that the Dynasty does, with supposedly ‘civilized’ restrictions. If these people were surprised by their enemies, then it would have been a slaughter. The way the bodies fell—in a disorganized, haphazard manner—seems to suggest such was the case. There’s no sign of ranks—most of the bodies are scattered and isolated.”

“You know a lot about war, dear man,” Cynder noted. “Of course, I guess that’s what you are paid for. What is that?” Cynder pointed to the other object Baon had brought into the tent—what looked like a human leg bone.

Baon picked up the bone lightly then, grasping it in two hands, he snapped it in two. The bone practically disintegrated in his fingers, shattering into tiny shards and chips at the slightest amount of pressure.

“What do you make of that, professors?” he asked, dusting off his hands. “I only found a few of those, but they were the only bodies that had been completely stripped of flesh. In fact, they looked like they had been drying in the sun for years.”

Cynder fingered a chip of bone, grinding it into powder on the table top. “These bones are old,” he mumbled. “Amazingly old. A burial ground of some sort?”

“You are the learned one, professor,” Baon said, taking a quick drink from his canteen, then taking a seat by the table.

Cynder chuckled. “Learning is all a matter of circumstance, my friend,” he noted. “I have no skill in this area.

“I think you’re right,” Khriss said, looking at the bone. “If it weren’t a burial ground, why would there be aged bones here? Perhaps they came for a ceremony of some sort.”

Cynder nodded to himself, rubbing his chin in thought. “Perhaps one of the villages lost a valued elder,” he mused, “and its people came to the sacred place to bury him. They were ambushed, however, by a rival village, and slaughtered. Maybe the fight itself unearthed a few graves—or maybe the victors did so to defile them—which would explain why you found some on the surface.”

Baon shrugged. “Sounds good to me. You might be missing one thing, though.”

Cynder looked up with a questioning look. Baon reached over to tap on the table with a dark finger. It was made of wood, though the base appeared to be shiny black carapace. “This wood didn’t come from one of those desert villages. It was cut from real logs, not the thin reed-like strips that make up our tent poles and the wood we’ve seen in the villages.”

“By the Divine,” Cynder said with a chuckle, rubbing his fingers across the table. “I didn’t even think of that.”

Baon caught Khriss' eyes, and his earlier comment came back to her. *Observation. Something they often fail to teach in that university of yours.*

"Lossand," Khriss decided. "It's the only place where there would be enough water to grow proper lumber."

"If you say—"

"Duchess!" a voice screamed. A second later, Baon was out of his seat, pistol cocked. Jeron's cries were not warnings of danger, however. The thick-armed soldier pulled back the tent flap, panting in the heat. "Duchess," he repeated, "we've found one that's still breathing!"

Cynder turned the man's head to the side, checking his pupil. The daysider was unconscious, but judging from the empty water barrel next to him, he had at one point been awake enough to drink. His skin was dried and cracked, and the skin on his face was peeling. He was alive, however, which was more than could be said for the rest of the bodies.

"Well?" Khriss asked.

"Well, My Lady, he's dehydrated—but you could probably have guessed that much. Other than that, I can tell you little. My medical training is hardly comprehensive."

"Leave him," Flennid decided. "We barely have enough water for ourselves."

The group looked from the young nobleman to Khriss, who knelt next to Cynder. Flennid's order was a challenge. "No," she decided. "We bring him."

"Ridos, woman!" Flennid spat. "You will kill us all!"

Khriss met his eyes for a moment, then looked away. "We can't leave him," she affirmed.

"Besides," Baon growled. "Since someone was kind enough to murder our guide, we might need some help getting out of this desert."

Flennid hissed, but backed down before Baon's hard face. Finally, the young nobleman pushed his way out of the tent, mumbling something about Khriss's foolishness. Jeron and Torth stood hesitantly at the departure, then rushed out after him.

Khriss turned her eyes back on the daysider. He wasn't the same race as the villagers—his hair was light, instead of the uniform

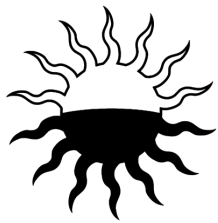
black, and his features more subdued. He wore the same white robe as the rest of the fallen, and tucked into his white sash was a second, golden one.

Who are you? She wondered. *Will you be able to tell us what happened here?*

They sat for a few minutes, watching Cynder do his best to administer to the fallen man. After about five minutes, Baon suddenly turned, his head cocked to the side. Khriss looked at the mercenary, a question on her face, but he quieted her, frowning in consternation. Then he cursed, dashing out of the tent. Khriss and the professors followed, and Khriss hastily replaced her dark spectacles as they stumbled back out into direct sunlight.

In the distance, already out of bow range, three familiar figures rode toward the basin's exit. By rope, they led eight other tonks—the rest of the mounts and pack animals… pack animals that held every drop of water the expedition had left.

– 5 –



Baon set three pistols on the table, each one thunking dully against the wood. “We have three pistols,” he said, “my two, and the one I took from Flennid. However,” he continued, lining a small handful of cylindrical, paper-wrapped charges below the weapons, “we only have ten charges, plus the four loaded in my pistols. We also have my sword,” he said, nodding to the sheathed weapon tied at his side.

“We have barely enough water to fill our three canteens,” Acron said nervously. “I searched through the tents—the water we found earlier had already been packed on the tonks.”

Eyes turned to Khriss. She shook her head. “I assumed we were going to sleep here today, so I brought my bags into the tent, but they aren’t going to be of much use. I have the map, some changes of clothing, and my scientific instruments.”

“This isn’t good,” Baon mumbled.

“My good man,” Cynder said with a chuckle, “I hardly think you need to point that out to us.”

Baon continued to rub his chin in thought. “All right,” he finally said. “You have some decisions to make, duchess.”

“Me?” Khriss asked.

“You are in charge of this expedition, are you not?” Baon asked. “This isn’t the Elisian senate. It’s your expedition; you tell us what

to do."

"I know," Khriss continued. "It's just that I didn't think we had a choice."

"We always have choices, duchess," Baon informed. "We can try to make it to a town, or we can wait here and hope someone comes to bury those bodies."

"Of course," Cynder added, "if the entire town was slaughtered, then there won't be anyone left to care."

"That is the risk," Baon said. "And, even if they did survive, there is a good chance that they aren't willing to risk coming back—otherwise, why leave the bodies for so long? Still, we would definitely last longer on the water we have if we stayed here in the shade."

"Waiting to die," Khriss said with a sick feeling.

"I'm not giving an opinion, duchess, I'm stating options. So, we can go or we can stay, or we can try a mixture of both—wait for a while, then go. Another consideration is what we do with him," Baon nodded to the daysider who lay, still unconscious, on the room's cot. Over the last few hours, Cynder had incrementally dumped nearly half a canteen's worth of precious water between his immobile lips, hoping to hydrate him somewhat. Even though the ministrations were done at Khriss's order, it was difficult to watch the water go in such a potentially wasteful manner.

"We don't have mounts anymore, duchess," Baon explained. "I don't know if you've ever tried to carry an unconscious man, but it is not an easy task. I would be the only one strong enough to attempt it, and I can guarantee that we won't be able to go very far if I do."

"We can't leave him," Khriss mumbled, almost to herself.

"Poor savage," Acron agreed.

Khriss studied the sleeping form, a feeling of helpless responsibility weighing on her back. Her expedition had started as nine, but she had almost immediately lost Captain Deral and his lieutenant to that Dynastic border patrol. Now, three more had deserted because of her poor leadership. Besides herself, only three remained—and it appeared it was her prerogative to choose which way they were going to die.

"We stay," she finally said. "For now, at least. The map shows a

four-day hike to the border of Lossand, and it's a few days further before we reach the first marked town. If there's anything closer, then it's not on the map. That unconscious man is our only chance."

Baon nodded, accepting her decision without argument. "Very well," he said. "Then I am going scouting. These rock formations appear to extend back for a distance—perhaps your original instinct was correct, and I'll find a natural spring."

He didn't sound very optimistic.

Kenton could hear a voice. It seemed familiar for some reason, like words spoken by a friend long forgotten. He focused on the voice, letting it lead him through the darkness, the unfamiliar blackness, the *night* of his mother's stories. He wanted so much to retreat before the dark, to huddle in the back of his mind, but the voice coaxed him forward. It burned like a candle in the distance, a guide through the darkness, and he followed it, crawling forward until…

His eyes snapped open. He was in his tent—he had just finished fighting the deep sandling. In a moment, Dirin would speak to him, then Traiben would visit. The advancement ceremony, the deaths, the slaughter… a dream.

"I should never have come to Dayside, Cynder," the voice said—a female voice. The voice he had heard in his darkness. He looked around with confusion as the voice continued. "I'm not a leader of men. I have the title, but that means less and less in Elis these days. I rarely even gave orders to servants—I spent most of my time in the university. Really, all being a duchess did was get me into parties and balls. Or, at least, whenever Gevin could drag me away from my studies long enough for such things."

Kenton was wrong—this wasn't his tent. It was similar, but the personal effects weren't his. The voice, it was speaking in Dynastic—his mother's language. He closed his eyes, feeling them burn with dehydration. It hadn't been a dream—it had happened, all of it. Traiben, Elorin, dead. His father… dead.

A groan of despair rose in his throat, though it escaped his desiccated lips as a pitiful croak.

The room fell silent. "Shella!" the voice finally said. There was a sound of chairs being moved, and then a face appeared above his own. Through his despair, Kenton had time for a moment of confusion—his muddled mind hadn't connected the language with

the nationality until he saw her face. *What is a darksider doing here?*

The girl, in her late teens or perhaps early twenties, had the dark skin and thin, fine features of a Darksider. Her eyes were a soft gray, her hair, which was worn without bun or braids, was long, well past shoulder-length. Her face was concerned, but at the same time excited.

"His eyes are open, Cynder!"

"I can see that, My Lady," a second voice said.

Kenton turned his head slightly, focusing on a second darksider, a balding man of perhaps sixty. He wore one of the strange, constrictive suits that darksiders were fond of, and he also seemed excited, though his emotions were much harder to read than those of the girl.

The man reached out, taking Kenton's pulse and inspecting his face with a critical eye.

"He's probably scared," the girl said with concern. "Waking up after such a slaughter to find strange, dark-skinned people hovering over him, speaking a strange language."

"Undoubtedly," the man agreed. "Either that, or he thinks he died and his god has a very odd sense of humor."

Kenton frowned. His Dynastic was rusty—since his mother's death two years ago, he had been given little chance to practice it. Their words, however, were familiar enough. He opened his mouth to speak—to ask one of the hundred questions that were blooming in his mind as his senses returned. He was cut off, however, by a movement from the tent door.

The largest man Kenton had ever seen stood silhouetted by the sunlight. His skin was even darker that of other Darksiders—a black, rather than a soft brown. He wore a Kershtian robe, but left it open at the front, turning into something more like a duster or a jacket. Underneath he wore a tight shirt made of the strange springy cloth Kenton had sometimes seen traders peddling, along with a stiff pair of Darksider leggings. His face was less fine-featured than those of the other two—his nose larger, his chin more pronounced—and his stance, eyes, and expression left little speculation as to his profession. This man was a warrior.

"He's awake," the man stated simply.

“You almost sound disappointed, Baon,” the girl countered.

“It’s just, I assumed I had solved one of our problems.” The warrior lifted back the tent flap, revealing a large tonk—female, by the horn-count—grazing on sand outside.

“A tonk!” the girl yelped with amazement. “Baon, how did you manage it?”

“It’s the guide’s,” Baon explained. “I found it chewing on sand a short distance away.”

“Is there any water on it?” the girl asked eagerly, rising to push past Baon to inspect the tonk’s saddlebags. As she did so, the large warrior’s eyes fell on Kenton. They studied him for some reason, searching Kenton’s features with a calculating scrutiny.

“A little,” the warrior said. “Not very much, I’m afraid.”

“By the Divine!” the girl cursed. “What was he thinking? How was he planning to survive out here without water?”

Baon’s eyes continued to study Kenton, though Kenton couldn’t fathom what the man was searching for. The man’s eyes were… suspicious.

He knows, Kenton realized. *He can tell that I understand what they’re saying.*

“Well?” Baon asked directly at Kenton. “How do you people survive out here without water?”

The girl froze, turning around with confused eyes.

“You don’t waste any time, do you?” Kenton asked. The words came out slowly—he hadn’t spoken Dynastic in some time. The language still felt fairly natural, however.

“No,” the warrior, Baon, replied.

The girl’s eyes opened wide in disbelief, and the other Darksider, still sitting on a stool beside Kenton, chuckled softly to himself.

“The water?” Baon reminded.

“How can you be out of water?” Kenton asked, shaking his head. “You aren’t in the desert yet.”

Baon raised an eyebrow, lifting the tent flap again and pointing outside. “Sun. Sand. Desert.”

Kenton frowned. Could it be that the word in Dynastic didn’t mean what he thought it meant? “No, I mean, a desert—a place with no water.”

“Wait a minute!” the girl interrupted, stalking back into the tent.

“How do you speak Dynastic so well?”

“One topic at a time, duchess,” Baon said, cutting off her question. He looked directly at Kenton. “Daysider, I don’t understand you. If this isn’t a desert, where’s the water?”

“Well, all around us, of course,” Kenton replied. “You mean… No,” he realized, shaking his head. “Of course no one told you. It’s just, on dayside it’s common knowledge.”

“You were faking!” the girl said, folding her arms indignantly. “You pretended not to speak our language!”

“I did not,” Kenton protested.

“You sat there listening to us, all the time understanding what we were saying!” the girl challenged. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“You never gave me an opportunity to speak!” Kenton replied trying to sound sincere, though he couldn’t help smiling slightly at the ridiculousness of his situation. “You have some water left, I assume,” he said, turning to Baon.

The warrior nodded. “Only a little, daysider. Why?”

“Give it to me.”

The warrior frowned slightly, but he reached down to his belt and pulled out a round container with a cap. Kenton accepted the container, then rose from his cot. Instantly, a wave of light-headedness struck, and his vision began to darken.

He felt his arm grabbed by a powerful hand as Baon steadied him. A moment later the wave passed, but he could still feel the weakness in his limbs. He was far from healed.

“Do we need to go far?” Baon asked.

Kenton shook his head, breathing deeply. “No. Just outside. I can walk.”

The warrior released his grip, allowing Kenton to shuffle across the tent floor to the door. He pulled back the flap, stepping into the warm sun. The darksiders followed—though the girl and the old man put strange contraptions over their eyes—something like Kershtian eye-lenses, but much darker.

Kenton’s strength gave out as he walked out onto the sand, but he waved Baon back as he sank to his knees. He shook the water container, judging its contents. It was mostly full. *Probably enough,* he thought.

With that, he took of the stopper and began to pour the water onto the sand in front of him.

The girl gasped in alarm, moving to stop him, but the warrior grabbed her by the shoulder. “Wait,” he ordered.

Kenton continued to pour, letting the water drain slowly so it soaked down more than it did out. *Hopefully, there’s one near the surface…*

A moment later, the ground began to tremble slightly. Kenton thrust his hands into the ground, digging through the sand and grabbing the form he felt beneath. With a heave of his weakened arms, he pulled a thick vine from the sand. It was wider than a man’s arm, a dull brown in color. He could only lift it about a foot out of the sand—both of its ends continued on beneath the surface. What he had pulled free was part of a much, much larger network.

“Knife,” he requested, noting the exhaustion in his voice. He could hardly believe how difficult such simple actions seemed.

Baon produced a knife from a sheath at his calf—a well-crafted blade obviously intended for use as a weapon. Kenton sawed at the vine, slicing through its skin at an angle. “Good,” he said, handing back the knife. “Now, go get something to store this in.” With that, he pulled the two parts of the vine apart, and water began to seep from the hundreds of tiny tubes that ran inside its center.

“Shella!” the girl breathed as Kenton refilled Baon’s water container. The warrior ducked into a tent and returned with several of the water barrels from inside. It took Kenton a few moments to fill all three. Then he pushed the two halves of the vine together, pressing firmly to help them reseal. A second later it was done, and as he let the vine drop to the sand, its cilia quickly wiggled it beneath the surface.

“I don’t understand,” the girl objected, standing with her hands on her hips as she regarded the patch of sand—turned to black from the spill of water—where the vine had vanished. “Why would they carry water like that?”

“Does it mater?” Baon asked, lifting a ladle to his lips and tasting the water.

“Yes,” the girl said mater-of-factly. “It does.”

“It’s for protection,” Kenton explained. “Most…” What was a word for sandling in Dynastic? “Most sand-creatures have hard

shells that dissolve when they touch water. The dorim vines keep the water as a defensive mechanism—if sand-creatures try to eat it, their mouths melt."

"But, where does the water come from?" she continued.

"I don't know," Kenton confessed.

"It must be the water table, My Lady," the older darksider guessed. "Somewhere beneath all this sand, there must be a place where water collects."

Kenton frowned. He'd called her 'My Lady.' He remembered something from what he mother had said about Darkside. "My Lady?" he asked. "Are you a…" he searched for the word, and found he only knew it in Lossandin. "A *Kelzi*?"

"A what?" the girl asked with a frown.

"A *Kelzi*," Kenton repeated, trying to mimic the way his mother had always pronounced the word.

"Oh, a *Kelzi*," the girl said. "A… Land-holder. I suppose you could call me that, though it isn't quite right."

"A *Kli* then?" Kenton asked, changing to a Kershtian word for nobleman. "One whose title passes from parents to child?"

"Yes," the girl said with a nod. "That's it."

"Ah," Kenton said with a nod, motioning for Baon to help him regain his feet. "You must be very religious, then."

"Religious?" the girl asked with confusion. "Well, I suppose, but I don't see what that has to do with anything."

Kenton frowned. A *Kli* that wasn't religious? But, it was the Kershtian Theocracy that granted the title. This woman was odd—he spoke the words in her own language, but she still didn't seem to understand.

Baon helped him back into the tent, and he eased back onto the cot. In his hand, unnoticed buy the Darksiders—he hoped—he clutched a small handful of sand. He'd had another reason for wanting to go outside. He rested back, feeling sleep reach for him again, but forced himself to remain awake for a few moments longer. There was something he had to test—putting it off would only worry him further.

Reaching out, he called for the sand to come to life. Nothing happened.

Kenton let the sand dribble from his fingers, his earlier despair

returning. It was as he feared—the overmastery had burned away his abilities. He was no longer a sand master.

"Well, he did deceive us," Khriss said defensively, looking down at the daysider as he fell unconscious, a small handful of white sand slipping hourglass-like from between his limp fingers.

Baon raised an eyebrow. "If you say so, duchess," he said, carrying one of the knee-high barrels of water into the room.

"We didn't even bother to ask his name," Cynder mumbled with a chuckle.

Baon set the barrel beside the bed. Then, rising, he looked over at Khriss. "Good job," he said simply.

Khriss frowned, trying to follow the warrior's logic. "At what?"

"You made the right decision," Baon explained, carrying the second barrel into the room. "You decided not to leave him, even when Flennid challenged your authority. You stood behind your decision when we could have fled. Now, it appears as if we will live because of your resolve."

Khriss blushed. The mercenary spoke with a very matter-of-fact tone of voice, without a hint of flattery, but the compliment held more power than any courtly praise. "It wasn't an inspired decision, Baon," she replied. "It was more random than anything else—I could have led us to our deaths just as easily."

"I didn't say it was inspired," Baon corrected, placing the final barrel and rising to look her in the eyes. "It was consistent. You made a difficult decision, the best one you could, then had enough confidence in yourself to remain strong. You're not a leader, duchess. Someday, however, you may become one."

He walked by her, pushing aside the tent flap and striding out into the light.

"Well, you were right about something too, Baon."

"What?" he asked, moving to unlatch the tonk's saddlebags and rifle through them.

"The guide," Khriss explained. "He wasn't mad—he could have found us water at any time. He probably got quite a chuckle from the way we insisted on bringing all our water with us from the port city."

Baon smiled, locating something in the bags. He stood, holding something in his hands that looked like a large animal's bladder or

wineskin.

"There's a second thing they don't teach in your university, duchess," he said, throwing the large sack-like thing over his shoulder. "The unlearned aren't as stupid as you think."

"I'll remember that," she said with a half-smile. "What are you doing?"

Baon slipped his knife from its sheath, then nodded toward the bags over his shoulder. "They're waterbags—the guide probably intended to fill them once we reached 'the desert,' wherever that is. If our new daysider friend happens to die within the next few days, I want to be certain I can replicate what he just did."

When Kenton next awoke, some of his strength seemed to have returned. He was, at least, able to sit up without getting light-headed. He was alone in the tent—the darksiders were nowhere to be seen.

He sat for a moment, listening to the powerful *Kerla* wind blow at the tent's sides. Time had passed since the attack—he couldn't be certain how much, but days at least. A week maybe? How long could a person live without food? Thoughts of eating suddenly reminded him how hungry he was.

He stood, walking slowly over to the tent's door. He paused, however, before leaving. There, sitting on a short table beside the fluttering door, was a bright golden sash. His sash. How many years had he one day dreamed of earning it? How many years had it been since he had given up on such dreams, continuing to struggle because… because why? Because he wanted to spite his father? That was part of it. A great deal of who he was, the sinews that gave strength to his personality, was his rebellious spirit.

But now there was nothing to rebel against. He was a mastrell—but a mastrell of what? Had anyone else survived the massacre? Kenton grabbed the sash, but didn't tie it on. He had been made a mastrell, true, but he had just as immediately lost the status. A man couldn't be a mastrell if he couldn't master sand.

I'm not a sand master any more. His mind still refused to accept the idea. It was like he was numb; unwilling to face such a possibility. He had been in the Diem for eight years, he had worked and agonized to strengthen his one little ribbon. It couldn't be gone. It couldn't.

Kenton shook his head in disbelief, pushing away thoughts of his powers. He realized he was refusing to deal with the issue, but at the same time he didn't care. He couldn't face it. Not yet.

With a sigh, he shuffled out of the tent and into the warm sunlight. A short distance away, past the tents, he could see the plain where the advancement ceremonies had taken place. From such a distance the white specs that covered it could have been mistaken for stones, and not corpses.

Kenton stood for a long moment, staring out at the enormous graveyard. *Farewell, my friends… my father,* he bid. *Let us hope the Kershtians aren't right. Otherwise, the afterlife will be very difficult for you.* The Sand God was not known for his love toward sand masters.

What happened here? He thought, shaking his head in confusion. Something had been done to the sand masters—something that dehydrated them at an accelerated rate. They had started to overmaster when they assumed they had plenty of water, and by the time they realized the damage they were doing, it had been too late.

And the Kershtians are behind it somehow. They would never have attacked if they hadn't known the sand masters were weakened. A single mastrell was worth hundreds of warriors—Praxton's final effort proved that. Still, to attack the collected Diem…

We grew too lax, Kenton decided. *It was bound to happen eventually.* He was just as to blame as the rest of the Diem—he had heard of the new Kershtian high priest and his extreme hatred for sand mastery. He was said to be irrational, even for a Kershtian. Kenton had ignored him, as had the rest of the Diem. The Kershtians had been denouncing sand mastery for centuries—what had suddenly made them decide to act on their hatred?

And suddenly, Kenton knew what it must have been. *They found an accomplice—someone with the Diem to help them. Someone to poison the mastrells, to leave us defenseless.* It didn't take Kenton long to realize who the traitor was.

Drile.

When Kenton next awoke, he found himself strapped to the back of

the darksiders' tonk. He groaned, rising from the uncomfortable position to seat himself properly. He only vaguely remembered stumbling half-asleep to the beast's back, Baon explaining that the duchess—whatever a duchess was—wanted to get moving as soon as possible.

Kenton blinked against the light, reorienting himself. They were nearing the pillar-like rocks that rimmed the sand masters's meeting place. Kenton frowned. The plain was large, but it didn't take very long to cross. How long had they been moving?

Only then did he notice the group that trudged across the sand beside his tonk. The darksiders walked on the sand awkwardly, kicking up sand with each step and sometimes slipping. That, coupled with the fact that the party was made up of an old man, a girl, and an overweight man Kenton hadn't seen before, was enough to tell him that the trip would probably take a very, very long time.

"Look! The savage is awake!" the fat man said, his mood brightening slightly as he looked up and saw Kenton regarding them.

The others looked up. Their faces were wearied and taxed, though they probably hadn't been traveling for more than a few hours. Already, sand dust streaked their dark skin, sticking to the dried sweat they had long since stopped wiping away.

They will never last like this, he thought to himself with a shake of his head. *No matter how much water one has, the* Kerla *is not something to travel on foot.*

"We'll take a break when we reach the rim," the girl decided. She was obviously in charge, despite the fact that she was a woman, not to mention younger than the others. However, Kenton knew that things were different on darkside—he remembered with fondness how often his mother would clash with dayside authorities. Lossand was much more relaxed than Kershtian society, but she had claimed to find even that restrictive.

They crossed the remaining distance to the rock wall in silence, though Kenton did catch the girl shooting him the occasional suspicious look. He could only smile to himself, shaking his head. For some reason she had decided to distrust him; she was obviously convinced he was hiding something—which was perfectly all right, considering the fact that he was.

Such thoughts brought back the pain—not only of his fallen comrades, but of his own inability. Every sand master, no matter how weak, was schooled from his first day in the Diem not to overmaster. Overmastery killed, overmastery weakened, and overmastery burned out power. It appeared that Kenton was first-hand proof of that last possibility.

"Here," the warrior Baon said, finally leading tonk and party into the relative coolness of the rock's shade. The fat man sighed in relief, collapsing to the sand, and the others didn't fare much better. Only Baon remained on his feet—the walk didn't seem to have bothered him at all.

Kenton shared a look with the darkside warrior, who nodded in understanding. He realized it too.

"How on the sands did you get trapped with only one tonk?" Kenton asked.

"We were—" the girl paused. "Wait, I should be asking *you* questions."

Kenton sighed, looking over at Baon. "Well?" he asked.

"Betrayal," the warrior said simply, taking a sip from his water bottle.

The girl huffed indignantly at the slight.

"Is she always this bad?" Kenton asked, nodding toward the girl.

"Only in the mornings," the warrior informed. "Or," he added, "after she's been forced to hike for two hours in dayside heat."

Kenton nodded, immediately feeling guilty for his insolence. The simple fact was that he was just too good at defying authority. He'd been rebelling against the Diem's leadership for so long, he immediately reacted impertinently to anyone in a position of command.

Too late now, Kenton decided, looking at the Darkside girl's face with a sigh.

Khriss started, taken aback by the Daysider's rudeness. Never, in her entire life, had she been treated in such a way. Baon was blunt, true, but not rude. Even Flennid, who had obviously resented her, had made his opinion known with an air of court-bred subtlety.

Khriss didn't know how to react. All her life, people had treated her with the respect that her title demanded. True, she had never been a large part of court politics, and therefore was often the

subject of jokes or rumors, but such were to be expected, and at least they were never expressed before her face. This Daysider's speech, his entire air, was intentionally disrespectful.

She almost backed down and left him alone. However, Baon's words from before stood defiantly in the back of her mind—the warrior had inferred that that she was too quick to let others ignore her station. So it was that she found herself staring defiantly back at the Daysider.

"Children," Cynder interrupted, "I hate to break such a beautifully tense moment, but aren't either of you bothered by the fact that our mercenary just drew his weapon?"

Khriss looked over with surprise, noticing for the first time that Baon was holding one of his silver, double-barreled pistols at the ready, his head cocked to the side as if listening for something. He held up a hand to forestall questions, and crept across the shaded sand, sticking close to the rock wall. He rounded the lip of the rock opening that led out of the enclosed crater, stepping softly on the sand, his pistol cocked. Then, suddenly, he spun the rest of the way around the corner, his weapon held at the ready.

He stood for a moment, a look that could only be surprise on his face, then lowered his weapon. "By the Divine," he mumbled.

"What?" Khriss demanded, hoisting herself to her feet and peeking around the corner.

There, tied to a rock outcropping, were four familiar tonks, one bearing Stump's distinctive broken horn.

"I'd wondered how even Flennid could be so cruel to take all the mounts," Cynder mumbled, joining the two.

Khriss nodded. "Apparently he isn't as evil as we assumed."

Baon snorted, tucking his pistol back into his belt. "Taking these mounts is probably the only smart thing that boy did this entire expedition," he informed, walking over to inspect the animals. "He probably guessed what I would do to him if I'd been able to chase him down."

"By the Divine!" Acron said with relief. "Oh, blessed be Shella and Ridos! Flennid has a heart after all."

"Don't give him too much credit," Baon warned, checking through the saddlebags. "They didn't leave us any water. Of course, I suppose that makes sense."

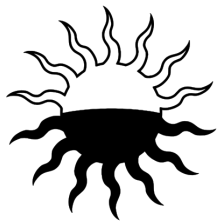
“Sense? Killing us makes sense?” Khriss asked.

Baon shrugged. “We had enough water to last seven of us for three days. The nearest town is seven days away—that means three could make it if they took all the water. Those three might have been fools, but physically they were probably the most likely to survive.”

“That’s heartless reasoning, Baon,” Khriss said, feeling chilled despite the Dayside heat.

“I didn’t say I agree with its morals, duchess,” Baon said, strapping the final saddlebag closed. “I just said it makes logical sense. Come on, it’s looking like we might actually survive this trip.”

– 6 –



Kenton looked up at the sun, his old friend, the first and strongest companion of every Daysider. *Ker'reen* philosophy—religion of the Kershtians—called the sun a manifestation of the Sand Lord, but even daysiders that didn't worship the sun felt some spiritual bond with it. Despite the Diem's historical atheism, Kenton had met few sand masters who didn't at least feel reverence for the great orb. In the very least it was the force that made sand mastery possible, for once sand was mastered it was left black and stale, and only four hours of charging in the sun would restore it.

But, this day the sun felt different. Not the sun itself, put its position in the sky. It was in the wrong place.

"We go that way," Kenton said, pointing to the southwest.

"How can you tell?" the duchess, Khrissalla, demanded.

Kenton smiled. He didn't think the girl realized how impatient her voice sounded. She was simply the type who was accustomed to getting quick answers to her questions. Of course, understanding her arrogance didn't make him any more accepting—he did, after all, have his pride.

"Magic," Kenton informed, hammering his tonk into motion. The darksiders joined in, moving their own beasts forward as well.

Khrissalla snorted at his answer, maladroitly moving her tonk up next to his own—she still hadn't quite mastered the art of

controlling the beasts. “You’re guessing,” she accused. “You saw my map, and now you’re just making it seem like you know what you’re doing.”

“Yes, I did see your map, Khrissalla,” Kenton said, being certain to use her name, if only because he knew it bothered her. She should have just introduced herself as ‘the duchess’ rather than ‘the duchess Khrissalla.’ “Or, at least,” he continued, “I saw enough of it to know it was out of date and rather inaccurate. I know four year-old children who could produce a better depiction of dayside.”

“All right then, how do you know which way to go?”

Kenton sighed—he had to concede the duchess one point: she was nothing if not persistent. They had been traveling for about two days now, and he was coming to understand that no amount of subject dodging, ignoring, or even straight rejecting would dissuade Khrisalla’s curiosity. It was becoming more and more obvious that if he wanted her to stop pestering him, he was going to have to give her some answers.

“When the sun hangs in the exact same spot for your entire life, you become very sensitive to its changes,” he explained. “The sun feels… out of place to me. It should be lower in the sky, and a little bit to the east.”

Khrissalla blinked in surprise—she obviously hadn’t expected an answer from him. He had, after all, spent the last two days doing his best to be as annoyingly close-mouthed as possible.

“You can really feel it?” she asked, turning her black-glassed eyes back towards the sun.

Kenton nodded. “On dayside, you never need a map to guide you home. You only need the sun.”

The girl frowned. “But, how can you tell east and west? Other than the mountain, there aren’t any landmarks.”

Kenton shrugged. “You just can. You know when the sun is in the right place.”

Khrissalla frowned—she didn’t like it when his explanations had to with ‘feeling’ or ‘sensing.’ Kenton found her confusion odd; the comments always made sense to him. The duchess, however, kept asking ‘why’ and ‘how.’ She wanted parameters for everything, measurements she could scribble in the ledger she always seemed to have in her lap.

However, she probably decided that ambiguous answers were better than no answers at all, for she decided to continue. “You said magic, at first. Do you believe in magic?”

Kenton raised an eyebrow—this was a new one. Did he believe in magic? Well, his father had actually granted him mastrellship. That was about as magical an event as Kenton could imagine. “Sure,” he said.

“Sure?” Khrissalla repeated. “That doesn’t sound very certain.” She turned toward him, obviously intending to give him a prompting stare, but the expression was ruined by the black contraptions on her eyes—the things she called spectacles. On her head was a wide floppy hat that no self-respecting *Kerla* traveler would wear, and, as normal, her long hair blew free in the wind. She wore her Kershtian robe pulled tight around her body, accentuating her form in a scandalous way.

“There could be magic,” Kenton explained. “I’ve never seen any, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. The Kershtians talk about many things happening during worship services.”

“What about the Sand Mages?” she asked.

“The who?” Kenton asked, frowning. Mage? He was unfamiliar with the word.

“The Sand Mages,” Khrissalla repeated. “They rule Lossand.”

Kenton snorted. “I’ve never heard of them. If they rule Lossand, then they are very good at making certain no one realizes it.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“You’re certain?” she asked.

Kenton frowned. “Of course I am. I’ve lived in Lossand all my life. It’s ruled by the Profession heads, not these mages, whatever they are.”

Khriss turned away from him, an odd expression in her face. Sorrow? “Oh, Gevin,” she all but whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” she said, looking melancholy.

First she gets mad at me for refusing to answer, he thought with a shake of his head. *Then, when I do answer, she gets sad for no reason.* “Woman, you are completely incomprehensible,” he declared, hammering his tonk forward.

For once, the Daysider’s rudeness didn’t affect her. She barely

noticed as he rode away. Gevin had been wrong, and she had been right. Why, then, did she feel so horrible?

It wasn't my dream, Gevin, it was yours. But that was enough for me to want to believe in it. If the stories had somehow been true, they would have disproven Khriss's logic—the same logic that told her there was no way she was going to find the prince alive after such a long absence.

"Duchess." Baon's voice drew her away from unpleasant speculations.

"Yes, Baon?" she asked, turning as his tonk pulled alongside hers.

Baon paused, seeing her face. Despite the spectacles, Baon had an almost supernatural ability to sense someone's mood. "Kenton being close-mouthed again?" he assumed.

"No," she replied. "He actually decided to answer today."

"But you didn't like what you heard."

"It doesn't matter," Khriss said dismissively. "He still refuses to speak about the important things. He claims to be nothing more than a servant, but he won't explain what the group was doing out in the desert—or, rather, the *Kerla*." It was going to take a long time for her to stop thinking as the endless dunes of sand as a desert. "Personally, I think he's lying," Khriss added, seeking out the Daysider in his white robe.

"He's certainly hiding something," Baon agreed.

"How do you know?"

"I asked him," Baon said simply.

"Asked him what?" Khriss said with a frown.

"I asked him if he was hiding something," Baon explained. "He said he was."

"And you didn't go any further?"

Baon shrugged. "If he wanted to tell me what it was, then he wouldn't be hiding it, would he?"

Khriss sighed.

"Of course, it probably has something to do with the sword."

Khriss perked up. "What sword?" she asked.

"The one he's not wearing," Baon informed. "He checks for it occasionally, like a warrior. When he walks, his hand often falls to his side, as if to steady a sheath. The exercises he does after he

wakes, the ones he claims to recover his strength—those are the actions of a warrior."

"A warrior…" Khriss mumbled. "But, that doesn't mean anything, Baon. This is a primitive society—for all we know, everyone's trained as a warrior."

"I've done a lot of travelling, duchess," Baon said. "You would be surprised—even in the most violent of countries, servants are still the same. They don't have time to fight; and if they did, their masters wouldn't let them. Trained warriors make dangerous peasants."

Khriss let his 'lot of travelling' comment pass—Baon had already established that he would not speak about his past. While this Kenton was difficult to get information from, Baon was impossible.

"However, duchess," Baon continued, "speaking about the daysider's profession was not the reason I approached you."

"Oh?"

"We're out of food."

Khriss's stomach groaned in agreement. "I noticed," she informed. "I thought we decided there was nothing we could do about it."

"There isn't anything we can do about it," Baon agreed. "There might, however, be something he can do."

"But, he says we'll be reaching Lossand within a day or two. We can probably survive that long."

"Not if we listen to your anthropologist," Baon said, nodding his head backward.

Khriss turned, catching a glimpse of Acron's bulk settled despondently on his tonk's back. The anthropologist had been complaining quite profusely about the lack of supplies.

"He'll live," Khriss decided.

"True," Baon agreed with a rare smile. "But it might be worth asking anyway. I don't like travelling without provisions. Any number of things could happen in two days. If he can pull water out of the sand, then perhaps he can perform a similar miracle for food."

"All right," Khriss said. "I suppose you want me to do it."

"You are in charge, duchess."

"But he likes you better," she protested.

Baon just looked at her, and eventually Khriss sighed. She grabbed her hammer and gave Stump a tap, and he responded in his usual disorganized way, shambling vaguely in Kenton's direction. The Daysider looked over as she approached, a wry smirk on his face.

"Another question?" he asked. "You waited almost five minutes this time—you must have held yourself back."

"We need food, daysider," she said, gritting her teeth against his insulting tone.

Kenton frowned in confusion. "What do you mean? There's plenty of sand."

Khriss sat, stunned by the words, her eyes focusing on the vast dunes around them. "You don't actually eat…" She trailed off as she looked back at Kenton, noticing the mirth on his face.

"I hope your entire race isn't as gullible as you are, Khrissalla," he said. "Otherwise, your people are going to be in some serious trouble if Kershtian merchants ever make it over there."

Shella, Khriss thought, forcing herself to remain calm. No man had ever treated her in such a disrespectful way.

"I'll get you some food, Khrissalla," Kenton said, nodding toward the horizon. "We'll be reaching the desert soon; there are a lot of Kershtian towns built along the border—trading stations between the Kershtian nation and Lossand."

"Nation?" Khriss asked. "So far all we've seen are tiny tent cities. Is there more than that?"

Kenton raised his eyebrows at the question, but he chose to answer. "Yes—there are massive tent cities as well."

"But only tents?" Khriss said with a frown. "Are they all nomads?"

"No, none of them are," Kenton explained. "Tents are the only practical buildings to use in the *Kerla*. The winds blow so much that the sand level fluctuates enormously. Even the Kershtian capital of Ker Kedasha is composed entirely of tents—and its population is over fifty thousand."

"So, at these border towns," Khriss continued, "we'll be able to get food?"

"That depends," Kenton said with a shrug. "What are you willing to trade?"

Kenton placed the bag full of metal onto the merchant's trading table. The low table, constructed of cloth stretched across a flat construction of sandling carapace, sat in the center of a gaudy tent with embroidered walls and numerous cushions.

The Kershtian, a man with a broad face but thin limbs, opened the bag, picking at its contents with spindly fingers. "Not much, friend," he said. Two gold strings wrapped around his head just above the ears, holding a golden coin pressed against his forehead—the symbol of his *DaiKeen* allegiance.

"I know," Kenton said with a nod. They sat on cushions, as per the Kershtian way. Khrissalla had insisted on accompanying him, and sat on a cushion next to his own. Kenton turned back to the merchant, who was still appraising the scraps—whatever bits of metal Khrissalla and her group had been willing to part with.

The Kershtian nodded. "I'll give you much deal," he informed. "Best deal on sand! You want Kershtian coin'n, you want Lossandin coin'n?" He spoke with a heavy Kershtian accent, habitually adding soft 'ha' sounds to the end of all his 's's.

"Either coinage is fine," Kenton said with a shrug. "I'm just going to spend it on supplies."

"Spend them here, yes friend?" the Kershtian said, perking up. "Well, I give you sands good deal! My cousin, he sells supplies'n? You want food'n? *Qidoin*?"

"Food."

"Ah. Yes, friend."

"What's he saying?" Khrissalla interrupted from beside Kenton. She was watching the interchange with intense eyes—apparently she spoke a little Kershtian, or at least enough to pick out the occasional word.

"Not now, Khrissalla," Kenton hissed back.

The girl shot him an angry look. "I deserve to know what's going on. Those instruments are mine, after all."

"I'll write you a transcript later."

Khriss's eyes—she removed the spectacles inside—grew thin. "I don't trust you, Daysider. For all I know you're arranging to sell me into slavery."

"I'd be lucky to get a three-legged tonk out of that deal," he mumbled.

“What!”

“Hush,” Kenton insisted, shooting a look back at the Kershtian. The trader had watched the exchange with wide eyes, an offended look on his face. The expression couldn’t compare to the one he’d given earlier, however. When they had entered, the man had arranged cushions for them both to sit upon—and, according to custom, he had placed Khrissalla’s a few inches behind Kenton’s. The duchess had immediately scooted her cushion up, placing it equal with Kenton’s and the Kershtian’s.

“She is… quite beautiful, friend,” the Kershtian said, regaining his composure. Merchants who worked this close to Lossand were usually capable of dealing with more than their associates further into the *Kerla*.

“I suppose,” Kenton said with a wry smile.

The Kershtian shared his smile. “I have found, friend, *Lonsha* women are rarely worth the trouble’n of their arrogance.”

“Wise words, friend. Now, for the trade?”

The Kershtian smiled, eyeing the scraps eagerly. Metal and stone were valuable commodities in the *Kerla*, where the ground lay buried by a hundred feet of sand. Both materials were much less rare now than they had been before, mostly because of trading between Kershtians and Lossandins, but a small sack of steel such as the one he was offering could still turn a healthy profit.

The Kershtian quickly masked his interest, however, as he scooped the pieces back into the bag.

“How much?” Kenton asked.

The Kershtian shrugged. “Oh, friend, maybe forty lak? Much not useful, in scraps like this. Must be melted down, yes?”

Kenton snorted. “Put the bag back on the table, friend. I’m not a merchant, but I know that metal’s worth more than forty.”

The Kershtian placed the bag back on the trading table. “I don’t know, friend,” he said with a slight shrug. “Perhaps it is worth more, but… you lucky I trade with you. Others in town… maybe not so open-minded.”

Kenton frowned, focusing on the Kershtian’s innocent-looking face. The man was doing his best not to meet Kenton’s eyes—the Kershtian way of indicating he was making a threat.

Aiesha! Kenton thought with a frown. The man knew what he

was. But how? The gold sash was hidden in one of his pouches, and he had replaced his sand master's robes with nondescript ones before entering the town.

"Not many Lossandin travelling in the *Kerla* right now, especially not ones coming in that direction, friend," the Kershtian explained, nodding toward the open sands. "Most come from there," he explained, nodding toward Lossand.

Kenton frowned. It wasn't a guess—somehow this merchant had seen through him. "You've never refused to trade with my kind before," Kenton said, deciding there was no use in hiding. "What does who I am have to do with making a deal?"

"Nothing friend, that is why I make deal, eh?" The Kershtian still refused to meet his eyes. "But, times… times change. It is not a good now to be friends with *Ry'kensha.*"

"I'll take forty," Kenton decided, and the Kershtian smiled. "But," Kenton added. "I want something else as well. Information."

"What information, friend?"

"I want to know what has changed. I want to know why Kershtian warriors suddenly decided they could attack a group of sand masters."

"*Aiesha!*" the Kershtian hissed. "Not those words'n. Be careful, *eedsha.*" Then he eyed the bag of metal. Forty lak was an incredibly good deal for so much steel. Finally, the man looked up, meeting Kenton's eyes. The deal was done.

"Come," the merchant said, nodding toward the door. He rose, picking up his cushion. Kenton followed, as did a confused Khriss.

"What's going on?" she demanded.

"Later," Kenton insisted as the merchant placed his cushion near the door of the tent. The street outside was small, but busy—these border towns were prime places for trading.

Kenton sat back down, watching as the Kershtian nodded out the door. "You see that, friend."

Kenton followed the look. Standing across the small sand street were a couple of men, obviously warriors. They had *zinkallin* on their arms, and judging by the scowls on their faces, the weapons were probably pumped and ready to fire. Swords were strapped to their sides, and they wore shiny, well-made carapace armor.

"Soldiers," Kenton noted. "From the warrior *DaiKeen.*"

“Soldiers, yes,” the merchant agreed. “Warrior *DaiKeen*… well…”

Kenton squinted, focusing on the men’s foreheads. Every Kershtian man wore a symbol to mark his *DaiKeen*—his profession, though a *DaiKeen* was more than just a job. *DaiKeenin* were more like clans, family groups that one could choose. The merchant symbol was a circle, and most of the merchant *DaiKeen* tied their marks to their foreheads. The warrior symbol was an ‘X’ tattooed on the forehead.

As one of the men turned, Kenton saw what the merchant was referring to. There was an ‘X’ on the warrior’s head, but it wasn’t tattooed on—it was a scar.

“But, scarring is the way of the…”

“Priest *DaiKeen*,” the merchant finished, leaning back into his tent. “Yes, friend. I know. Warrior symbol, priest marking-form. Very odd, yes?”

“A new *DaiKeen?*”

“Yes, friend,” the merchant said with a nod. “The new *A’Kar*, he created it’n.”

The new high priest, Kenton thought. *This isn’t good.* He’d seen that ‘X’ scar before—on the foreheads of the men who had slaughtered the sand masters.

“We of the merchants, we are worried,” the Kershtian confessed, his voice growing hushed. “The *A’Kar*, he has much popularity’n. He says he destroyed the *Ry’Kenshan*, that the Sand Lord is very pleased with him. And the time of choosing comes very soon…”

“The merchant *DaiKeen* hasn’t lost a choosing in centuries,” Kenton objected. “The High Merchant is King in Ker KeDasha.”

“Yes, friend,” the merchant said, a worried look on his face. “Perhaps, no problem. Perhaps…”

“I understand.”

The Kershtian shrugged. “The *A’Kar*, he was wrong in one thing. The *Ry’Kensha*, you are still live. A few, at least.”

“Others?” Kenton asked with concern. “You saw others returning through here?”

“A few.”

“When?” Kenton demanded.

“A week ago, perhaps,” the Kershtian said. “A dozen men.”

A dozen. It wasn’t a large number, but at least Kenton wasn’t the only one to have survived.

“One thing I say, friend,” the Kershtian said. “Not all of us want the *A’Kar* to be king, yes? So, I trade. You buy food’n, and you go back to Lossand. The Sand Lord may take my soul’n, but I would not see the *A’Kar*’s words be true.”

“Politics?” Khrissalla demanded. “That’s what you were talking about?”

Kenton sighed, running his hand through his hair. “Yes, politics. Kershtian politics.”

“What does that have to do with us getting food?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

“Then why bother with it?”

Baon fell into step behind them, leaving the shade in front of the merchant’s doorway, where he had been guarding. He wore a slight smile that seemed to say ‘she saved you, Daysider, now you have to put up with her.’

“Two hundred years ago, the Kershtians and Lossandin stopped fighting,” Kenton explained.

“Why fight in the first place?” Khriss asked. “Did they want your land?”

“Hardly,” Kenton said with a snort, leading them through the small city toward the place where the merchant had said his cousin ran a supply store. “The Kershtians call Lossand the *Ry’Kel*, the ‘cursed land.’ It’s the desert, remember? No water vines.”

“So, why fight?”

“We’re infidels,” Kenton explained. “Non-believers. The historical Kershtian viewpoint was that we had to be slain for our own good so we didn’t reproduce and raise up more infidels.”

“Sounds logical,” Baon noted with a snort.

“Two hundred years ago, the *A’Kar*—that’s Kershtian for High Priest—lost the Kingship for the first time in recorded history, and the High Merchant was crowned instead.”

Khrissalla frowned, completely oblivious to the looks her unbound hair and tight robe were drawing. “How does one lose a Kingship?”

“The *Klin*—the nobility, as you would call it—voted against

him."

"But, I thought you said being a nobleman was a religious position amongst the Kershtians," she put in.

Kenton raised an eyebrow in surprise. He hadn't thought she would remember that. "That's right, it is, which is why the *A'Kar* hadn't ever lost the choosing before. The title of *Kli* is granted by the *A'Kar*; it is the highest honor a Kershtian can hold. Once a *Kli* is chosen, however, the title is passed from father to son, as long as one maintains certain holy requirements. Eventually, the lines grew to the point that the families had been noble for so long, they barely remembered that the *A'Kar* had originally given them the title. Most of the *Klin* were merchants by profession. So, when the choosing came, there were enough that cast their vote for the High Merchant instead."

"They let a simple majority choose their King?" Khrissalla asked with downturned lips. "How primitive."

"If you say so, Khrissalla," Kenton said with a shrug. "For dayside, the change was the best thing that could have happened. The wars stopped, and trading began. There are still battles, of course—but those are mostly between Kershtian families. On the whole, the last two centuries have been very good for Lossand."

"But that could change soon?" the duchess asked as they arrived at the supply tent.

Kenton smiled to the proprietor—a man who looked almost identical to the one they had left behind, though the *DaiKeen* symbol tied to his forehead was wood instead of gold. The man smiled and began to negotiate the trade.

"Yes," Kenton said back to Khriss as the merchant went to get the requested supplies. "The fifty-years between choosings is up this year, and it is starting to look like the *A'Kar* might win this time. That would be… bad."

He made the deal with the merchant, trading for a week's provisions for five people. They wouldn't need so much, but it was always good to be prepared. Besides, Kenton hadn't eaten much since his recovery a few days back. He was beginning to feel like he could devour the entire bundle of food himself—even if the Kershtians had covered it with their strong spices.

"So, what did your battle—the one that left you wounded—have

to do with this *A'Kar*?" Khriss asked innocently as they turned back out into the crowded market street.

Kenton paused. *She's guessing*, he decided. *Just grasping for connections*. It was a good guess, though. "Look, Khriss," he said, "I'm not going to tell you anything more about that. I—" he paused. She was giving him an odd look. "What?" he asked.

"What did you call me?"

"Khriss," he said with a shrug. "Khrissalla is too long—especially if I'm going to keep using it to annoy you."

"That's what Gevin used to call me," she said quietly, her eyes somewhat dazed.

"Who's—" Kenton paused as he felt an almost unnoticeable tug at his money pouch. A pickpocket. Fortunately, he didn't have any money. Unfortunately, he had chosen to store something infinitely more precious in his money pouch.

He spun, reaching for the thief's hand. The pickpocket was a small Kershtian boy of perhaps twelve. Kenton was too slow—the boy had already started to pull back when Kenton reached for him. And, as the boy moved away, his hand tugged something bright from Kenton's pouch.

The end of his golden mastrell's sash.

The boy yelped in alarm, dropping the sash as if it were a deadly sandling. The marketplace froze around them, hundreds of eyes turning to focus on the sash, which Kenton furiously tried to stuff back into its pouch. As he worked, his eyes fell on a pair of faces that stood out from the crowd—faces with cold eyes and scarred 'X's on their foreheads.

"I think we'd better go," Kenton said, motioning for Khriss and Baon to follow.

"How far is it to Lossand?"

Kenton sighed at the question, but Khriss ignored the sound. She would have her answers no matter how rude he decided to be. She still couldn't understand why her questions bothered him so much—they were only logical. She was new to Dayside; it made sense that she would have a lot of things to ask. The only way she was going to learn was if someone told her.

"I'll answer, but only if you promise to answer one for me."

Khriss frowned. They had entered what Kenton called 'the

desert' just after leaving the town a few hours before, but the landscape seemed the same to Khriss. There was nothing around them to be seen but the same white dunes, some barely a few feet in height, others taller than a man astride a horse.

"Well?" Kenton prompted.

"All right," Khriss decided. What could he ask that she wasn't willing to share, anyway?

"We're already in Lossand," Kenton explained. "Technically, it starts where the desert does—though the sand won't start to recede until tomorrow. Now, my question. Who is Gevin?"

Khriss froze, feeling her chest grow tight. *Oh, Shella, not this…*

"I heard you mention his name earlier," Kenton explained.

Khriss paused, trying to think of a way around the question. Kenton's stare was demanding, however, and she couldn't bring herself to tell an outright lie, no matter how little she wanted to discuss the subject.

"He… he is my betrothed," Khriss said quietly.

"Betrothed?" Kenton asked with a smirk. "Someone actually asked you to marry him?"

Khriss inhaled sharply at the barb, bowing her head as she felt her cheeks blush.

"I'm sorry," Kenton said a moment later, his voice reserved. "I went too far that time."

Khriss nodded feebly. "He didn't ask me, really," she explained softly. "It was more of an… understood betrothal."

"Arranged marriage?"

"No, but it would have been, had we not taken the initiative ourselves. Gevin—or, his full name is Gevalden—is a prince of Elis. He's the second son, but an important match nonetheless. There are only so many unmarried women of the proper rank and age."

"I see. And you left this prince of yours to come to Dayside?" Kenton asked.

Khriss shook her head, keeping her pain inside, hidden behind a courtly mask. She raised her eyes, looking back at him with composure. "I didn't leave him, I came to find him."

"He's on Dayside?" Kenton asked incredulously.

Khriss nodded.

"And, so your expedition isn't just one of scientific exploration,

like you told me," he pointed out. "Now who's lying?"

"I didn't lie," Khriss defended. "This *is* a scientific expedition, just as Gevin's was."

Kenton shook his head with a smile. "I'm sorry, Khriss, but I have difficulty understanding why you all came over here. From what I understand, these 'nobles' of yours are fairly important people. What does Dayside have that's so intriguing?"

"A dream," Khriss whispered. "A foolish man's dream."

Kenton gave her a questioning look.

"Sand mages," Khriss explained with a sigh. "They're legends on Darkside. There are dozens of stories told of them—supposed powerful beings that live on dayside, controlling the elements with their magics. The stories are told to children, mostly. No one believes them… or, not seriously at least. No one but Gevin."

"They're supposed to be able to… control the elements?" Kenton asked slowly, a strange tone in his voice.

"Yes," Khriss confessed, suddenly feeling embarrassed at having brought up the topic. What must he think of her? "The stories are foolish things," she said quickly, "completely unrealistic. Men always make up tales of the unknown—and in Elis, dayside is the ultimate unknown."

As they spoke, Khriss noticed Baon hammering his tonk to a slower speed, so he dropped back closer to her own. The warrior waited at a respectful distance, not breaking into the conversation.

"What exactly were these sand mages supposed to be able to do?" Kenton asked.

Khriss frowned. She didn't know what to make of the odd solemnity to the Daysider's voice. Was he mocking her again? "Silly things, mostly. Fly trough the air, call up enormous storms of sand. They often grant wishes to travelers lost in the wilderness. Most of the stories agree that they're impervious to normal weapons, and that they can make objects float with their minds."

"I see," Kenton said. "The stories must be fascinating."

Khriss shrugged. "If you're a child, I suppose." Then she turned toward Baon. "What is it, Baon?"

"A question for the daysider," he explained, bringing his tonk in closer.

"Yes?" Kenton asked curiously.

“You’ve stopped looking over your shoulder,” Baon pointed out.

“What?” Kenton asked with surprise.

“Ever since we left that town, you’ve been nervous. Like you thought someone might follow us.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” Kenton said. “I was wrong. They aren’t __”

He was interrupted as a massive man-shaped form exploded from the side of the dune next to Baon, spraying sand into the air as it tackled the warrior and tore him off his tonk.

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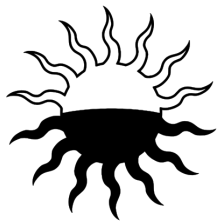


Baon thumped to the sand. His assailant, a bare-chested Kershtian, fell with him. Tonks shuffled nervously, kicking up sand as the two men rolled on the ground. The Kershtian clutched Baon's robes with one hand and raised a carapace hatchet in the other. A second later, the sand exploded all around them, spewing forth a half-dozen warriors.

Kenton cursed, immediately jumping off his tonk. The move was well-placed, for a moment later he heard the distinctive air-rushings of *zinkallin* being fired. Three small arrows hissed through the air above him and a fourth snapped off his tonk's carapace. There was little doubt who the Kershtians were after.

Kenton pressed against the side of his mount, keeping it between himself and the majority of the Kershtians. Only one was on his side—unfortunately, one was more than enough. The warrior, clothed in black carapace armor, was already lowering his *zinkall* to fire again. Years of training with the Tower's warriors finally became kinetic as Kenton dropped instinctively, rolling to the ground, dodging a virtually point-blank shot. His tonk bellowed—the arrow must have hit one of the chinks in its carapace—but Kenton ignored the beast as he rolled to his feet only a short distance from his opponent. In his hand he clutched a handful of sand.

The warrior flinched instinctively, spitting out a curse against

the *Ry'Kensha* as Kenton raised his sand. The *A'Kar* might have found a way to convince them to fight sand masters, but he couldn't remove millennia-old cultural phobias. Kenton thrust the sand forward, his command for it to obey him as instinctual as the Kershtian's fear.

Nothing happened.

Kenton cursed, throwing the ineffectual sand at his opponent. The Kershtian, still expecting the sand to kill him, threw up his arms—his face horrified. When the unmastered grains sprayed across his armor, the man barely had a chance to lower his arms in confusion before Kenton's punch took him in the face. The Kershtian grunted in pain, stumbling backwards. Kenton followed him, reaching down to slide the man's carapace-sword free from the sheath at his side.

A moment later, pain sliced through Kenton's arm, and he felt an arrow tear at his robes. It only nicked his skin, but it was enough to remind him that this was not a one-on-one battle. He cried out, thrusting the carapace sword at his opponent's face. The warrior, who had recovered from the punch, easily blocked the blow with his armored forearm. The attack had not been intended to hit, however.

Kenton spun around the warrior, putting the man's body between himself and the rest of the battle. The archer who had wounded him still had one arrow left, and as Kenton turned, he was able to pick the man out. He had rounded Kenton's tonk, and knelt on the sand, his face calm as he aimed his gauntleted forearm for another shot—a shot that was now blocked, however, by his comrade.

Kenton reached out for his human shield—intending to grapple with the man and hold him close in an attempt to keep the others from firing their *zinkallin*. Unfortunately, the Kershtian realized what was happening, and instead of spinning to face Kenton he simply started running in the opposite direction—leaving Kenton standing stupidly on the sand with no cover. Two other warriors moved around the tonk and prepared to take shots at him.

Kenton looked around wildly, realizing he was trapped. His back was to a dune, and he had opponents on all sides. He barely had time to reach down for a handful of sand and hold it out

threateningly as his intended shield moved out of the way.

Kenton froze. He intended to scream out warnings in broken Kershtian, but his voice caught in his throat. Fear choked his words. All he had was the sand clutched in his sweating fist.

Come to life! his mind ordered the sand. In all his life, he had never needed sand mastery so urgently. *Please!*

A deafening explosion sounded, causing Kenton to cry out in shock and pain. One of the warriors's heads exploded.

Gore splattered across the white sands, and the already spooked tonks dropped to the sand in fright, burrowing down until only the tips of their shells were visible.

What…? Kenton thought in confusion, his ears ringing. At first, he thought it had been his sand—but the handful still sat in his fist, unmastered. Then he saw Baon.

The black-skinned warrior stood tall, some sort of steel tube held in his hand. Smoke rose in the air before him. The Kershtian that had attacked Baon lay face down in the sand, his neck twisted at a gruesome angle.

Calmly, the darksider turned his weapon on another one of the archers, and a second later there was an explosive crack. Carapace armor shattered like glass, and the warrior was thrown backwards several feet. When the man fell to the ground, Kenton could see a hole in his back a handspan wide.

The hard-faced darksider turned his weapon on a third man. The Kershtian stared at his opponent for a moment, his eyes wide with horror, before breaking into a terrified run. The other three joined him, screaming in frightened Kershtian as they disappeared around a dune. The sound of galloping sandlings sounded a few moments later.

Khriss sat stunned on her tonk's back. Her legs were buried up to the knees in sand—as was most of her mount. Only the tonk's back and the stump of his broken horn were visible. She would have joined him beneath the sand, had she been able to get her paralyzed muscles to move.

"Oh Shella, oh Shella, oh Shella…" she heard herself mumbling as she stared dumbly at the remains of the men who had attacked them.

Fortunately, the warriors had ignored her during the attack,

instead focusing their attention on Baon and Kenton. The battle had happened almost as if she and the professors weren't there, churning around them as if they were barriers rather than targets. And then the pistol fire…

Khriss had never seen a man shot before. A few months earlier, while running the Dynastic barricade, they had lost Captain Deral—but that had happened while the warriors were out scouting. She had never seen the bodies—Baon had rushed them away from the site quickly, warning that they had been discovered.

Now she had seen a man die. The scientist in her noted that it was much messier than she had expected. She had assumed the musket balls entered the body like an arrow, piercing the skin and leaving a small hole. That was not the case. The balls smashed more than they pierced, tearing wide holes or, in the case of the man who had been hit in the head, completely destroying.

The logical side of her mind soon gave way before the disturbed side, however, and the scientist was forced to retreat before a far more awesome force—trauma. She closed her eyes to the death, breathing deeply and shaking before the horrible scene.

Kenton was shaken, but once again his training came to his aid. He discarded the unused carapace sword, instead pulling a complete sheath, weapon, and belt from one of the fallen men—trying his best not to look at the man's stump of a neck. Then he turned to Baon.

"We should go," he informed, his voice more calm than he felt. "Kershtians never abandon the bodies of their fallen—they believe a man must be buried in deep sand lest his soul be lost to wander the *kerla*."

Baon nodded, replacing his strange weapon in a sheath at his side. Kenton regarded it for a moment, remembering its incredible power. He had seen the weapons at Baon's sides, but had assumed them to be instruments of some sort. Who could have imagined a weapon so small, yet so destructive?

Kenton shook his head, moving over to begin raising the tonks. *Ask later. Right now, we need to move.*

"My first battle!" a voice suddenly exclaimed. Kenton turned to find Acron, his eyes strangely excited, sitting astride his mostly-buried mount. "I say, Kenton—does this sort of thing happen

often?" He looked… eager. As if he had been treated to a performance of some kind.

"Acron, for once, please shut up," a pained voice came from a short distance away.

The elderly Cynder still sat atop his own mount as well, but he was obviously less-enthused about the experience than Acron. Kenton noted with concern that the older man was clutching his left arm, the end of a *zinkall* arrow sticking from between his bloodied fingers.

Kenton cursed, rushing over to Cynder.

"It's nothing," the linguist said with a slight gasp of pain as Kenton examined the wound.

With a simple tug, Kenton pulled the arrow out of Cynder's arm. It slid out easily—it no longer had a head.

"What…?" Cynder asked with confusion, regarding the tip of the arrow.

"The arrowhead wasn't treated," Kenton explained, pulling out his *qido*. "The carapace dissolved. Grit your teeth, this is going to hurt."

Cynder barely had time to inhale in preparation as Kenton cleaned the wound. The linguist finally broke down and cried out in agony as Kenton forced as much as the dissolved arrowhead out of the wound as possible, then bound it with a strip of cloth.

"What are you doing to him?" Baon demanded.

"Carapace can cause a wound to fester," Kenton explained, stepping back and reaching down to rap Cynder's tonk on the horn with the tip of his sword sheath. The creature immediately began to unbury itself, shaking and wiggling as it climbed out of the sand.

Baon watched the process with calculating eyes, then began to move opposite Kenton, rapping horns and bringing tonks out of the sand. Kenton paused beside Khriss's tonk. The girl had obviously been disquieted by the battle—her eyes were closed, and she was mumbling softly to herself as she rocked back and forth. Kenton waited hesitantly for a moment, then reached out to shake her on the shoulder.

"Khrissalla?" he asked softly.

The girl exhaled deeply, then opened her eyes. "I'm all right," she said weakly.

Kenton nodded slowly, then reached over to tap his sword against the tonk's stump. The creature began to move, raising itself from the sand.

Khriss frowned, watching the process. "Why…?" she began, focusing on the tonks and, as far as Kenton could tell, intentionally keeping her eyes off the three bodies. "Why would they develop such odd behavior? Surely hiding beneath the sand doesn't protect them from predators."

Kenton smiled. If she could ask questions, then she was probably all right. "It isn't to protect them from predators," he explained. "This is what they do in a sandstorm. Tonks have very weak minds—whenever they get confused, they assume they're in a sandstorm and bury themselves beneath the ground."

Kenton tapped the tonk, sending it to wander over and join the rest of the beasts, then he turned to find Baon. The dark warrior was squatting on the sand beside the first warrior that had attacked—the strange unarmored one. Kenton joined him, watching as Baon rolled the body over, revealing a face crusted with sand.

"Will the linguist be all right?" Baon asked quietly.

"He should be," Kenton replied. "Melted carapace rots easily unless it is dried properly. I think I got the wound clean enough, however."

Baon nodded quietly, then gestured toward the dead man on the ground before him. "Recognize him?" Baon asked.

Kenton shook his head. "Not only don't I know him, Baon, but I've never seen anything like him before," he confessed. "Kershtians never fight unarmored, yet this man attacks wearing little more than a loin cloth. He also shaved his head—and I've never seen a Kershtian do that."

Baon grunted, reaching out to wipe the sand from the man's forehead. A pale scar stood out against his pale skin. An 'X' surrounded by a square. "What do you make of that?" Baon asked.

"The square is a symbol for priests," Kenton explained. "But the 'X' inside it is the marking of a warrior. I've never seen both together before."

"Whoever he is, he saved our lives," Baon said.

Kenton gave him a questioning look.

"He leapt out before the rest of them," Baon explained. "He

ruined the ambush. If this man hadn't been so eager to attack, then we wouldn't be standing here right now." Baon rose, dusting the sand from his knee. "Or, at least, you wouldn't be. Why did they want to kill you, daysider?" he asked bluntly.

"For something I used to be," Kenton answered, rising as well.

Baon searched Kenton's eyes, obviously unsatisfied with the answer. He asked no further questions, however. He stooped briefly, removing the *zinkall* from the priest's arm by cutting its straps, then walked back to his tonk.

"It's called a pistol," Khriss said.

Kenton looked up slowly. There was a haunted expression on his face—one of sorrow. He had grown quiet after the attack, almost unresponsive. During the past few hours, he had ignored Khriss's every attempt to draw him into conversation—an attitude that she found increasingly frustrating. She wanted to know why they had been attacked, who those men had been, and if they would attack again. Unfortunately, Kenton wasn't talking. So, Khriss had decided to try a new approach. Instead of asking questions, she tried to fuel Kenton sense of curiosity. It would have worked for her, after all.

"The weapon," Khriss continued, her tonk riding along beside her own. "It's called a pistol. You were probably wondering about it."

Kenton shrugged, the same sense of melancholy in his eyes. Khriss pulled out the spare pistol, the one Flennid had dropped, and inspected it as she talked.

"They're relatively new to darkside," Khriss explained. "Less than a century old. Only a few of the nations have them—the Dynasty is very proficient at keeping new technology from spreading through its provinces. Scythe—the current monarch of the Dynasty, something like a king or an emperor, though he is much more powerful than either word implies—knows how dangerous knowledge can be."

Kenton eyed the weapon for a moment, and Khriss caught a glimmer of interest therein. "So, it doesn't use air pressure at all?" Kenton finally asked.

"No, it uses gunpowder," Khriss replied, smiling slightly to herself.

"Gunpowder?" he asked with confusion.

“A type of explosive powder,” Khriss explained, handing the unloaded weapon toward him.

Kenton frowned, accepting the pistol and turning it over in his hands. “Gunpowder,” he mumbled, looking down the gun’s barrel then playing with its hammer experimentally. “It must be powerful, whatever it is. The sandling carapace Kershtians use for armor is nearly as hard as steel, but Baon’s attack shot through it with ease.”

Khriss nodded.

“How many times can this thing fire?” the daysider asked, cocking the hammer and pulling the trigger a few times.

“Just once,” Khriss explained.

“But—”

“Baon’s pistols have two barrels,” Khriss said. “They’re officer’s weapons, very well-crafted.”

Kenton smiled slightly, handing the pistol back to Khriss. “So he was bluffing,” he said. “He couldn’t have killed that third Kershtian.”

Khriss shrugged. “Not unless he pulled out his other pistol.”

Kenton looked up, looking a little less saddened than before. After the attack, they had continued to ride south, at first nervously—fearing that the strange warriors would return with reinforcements.

In fact, Khriss thought the group strangely calm, considering how close they had come to death just hours before. Up ahead, the overweight Acron chatted jollily with Cynder—or, more accurately, Acron chatted while Cynder rode in relative silence. The linguist was recovering well from his wound—there appeared to be no signs of an infection.

“So,” Khriss said experimentally, “do you think those warriors will attack again?”

A small smile crept onto Kenton’s lips. “I wondered when you would get to that,” he mumbled.

“Well, we deserve an explanation of some sort,” Khriss huffed.

“I suppose you do,” Kenton agreed, still staring off into the distance. “No, I don’ think they’ll attack again. We’re too close to Lossandin civilization now.”

“But, why did they try to kill us in the first place.”

“Not us,” Kenton corrected. “Me. They have nothing against

darksiders. They are opposed to Lossand on religious principles, however."

"I thought you said that the wars were over," Khriss challenged.

"I thought they were," Kenton said with a shake of his head. "Besides, just because most Kershtians are willing to forgive our heathen nature doesn't mean they all have. Those men we saw, they belonged to some new Kershtian religious group. That's why they tried to kill me. I'm a non-believer."

Khriss frowned. There was more he wasn't telling her, but she could sense the reservation within him. After travelling with him for just a few days, she knew that if she tried to press the issue, he would only grow more withdrawn.

In front of them, Baon suddenly hammered his mount to a halt. His head frozen in a posture of listening. Khriss grew cold, her hands suddenly gripping the unloaded pistol with tense anxiety. What had the warrior heard? Had the Kershtians finally returned?

Baon frowned, then turned his mount, hammering it forward and to the west. Khriss followed anxiously, but he didn't go far. The mercenary led his tonk up the side of a shallow dune, cresting the top and pulling to a halt. Khriss stopped beside him, and only then did she hear what he had noticed. Water.

Before her, the sand fell away, revealing a dun flat plain of smooth rocks marked with occasional piles of white sand. A cavern opened from the rock floor a short distance away, and bubbling from its depths was a massive river.

"The *Ry'Do Ali*," Kenton explained behind them. "The Vein of Cursed Waters, as the Kershtians have dubbed it. Lifeblood of Lossand."

"It's amazing…" Khriss said in awe. Just moments before they had been in a stark desert, not a patch of water to be seen. But here, suddenly, they were confronted by a roaring river at least fifty feet wide.

"We must have finally dropped beneath the water table," Cynder mused, rubbing his chin with his good arm.

"But where does it come from?" Khriss demanded.

"The mountain, perhaps?" Cynder guessed. "It melts at the mountain's top, but gets trapped in caverns and clefts, traveling down through the rock until it stops far beneath those sands."

Khriss nodded—the logic made sense, in a twisted dayside sort of way. Regardless of its geological roots, Khriss found the river intoxicating. For weeks now she had seen nothing but the repetitive dunes of white sand; she was happy to see anything different, even if it was relatively wan by darkside standards. The land surrounding the river was by no means lush, but compared to the desert, it was fertile. Sickly green bushes burrowed their roots into the rocky brown soil around the river, and there were even a few squat trees—though nothing grew on the pale white patches of sand.

"Lossand refers to the Ali for nearly all of its water," Kenton explained. "Our society can't stray far from its banks—there aren't any vines, and wells are unreliable at best. Welcome to the desert."

It was true. Kenton was no longer a sand master. He had finally realized that fact during the fight, when he had held up his sand and ordered it to obey him. It had failed him in his moment of desperation. It was really gone.

The realization had rested heavily upon him during the last few hours of riding. He had avoided it before, forced himself not to confront it, believing that for some reason he might regain his powers. Now, however, he had finally admitted the truth. He was no longer a sand master.

Kenton sighed, trying his best to deal with the incredible sense of loss he now felt. The realization seemed to bring with it a renewal of his feelings of loneliness. Once again, he was forced to face the reality of his father's death. He felt empty. Powerless. Sand mastery had been who he was—what was he now that it was gone? A shell, like the carapace of a dead sandling?

Kenton shook his head. He didn't know what he was now. All this time, he had used sand mastery almost more like a means to spite his father than an end itself. Perhaps if he hadn't been so callus with its use… Regardless, he certainly wasn't of much use now. He hadn't even taken out a single Kershtian in the most recent attack. Baon had done all the work.

The large dark-skinned warrior stood a short distance away, playing with the *zinkall* he had taken off one of the dead men. They had decided to take a break beside the river; Khriss and the two professors sat beneath the shade of a river-side tree while Baon practiced with his new weapon.

Kenton sighed, finishing his inspection of the tonks. One had to be certain tonk saddles lay properly—if one's skin was ever allowed to touch the beast's carapace, then sweat could begin dissolving their carapace. Eventually he finished, then turned to walk toward the darksiders. As he approached, Baon finished pumping and raised his arm to fire the *zinkall*.

The sound was not unlike that of a person exhaling quickly. The arrow, propelled by a burst of compressed air, flew straight, snapping into a nearby stump's crusty bark. Its shiny carapace head sunk about a half inch into the wood, sticking soundly.

Baon nodded appreciatively. The *zinkall*, designed for the much smaller dayside build, fit awkwardly on his bulging forearm. Its repaired straps were stretched to their limits, and the tip of the gauntlet, which was supposed to extend over the knuckles, only reached to his wrist.

Baon raised his arm again, careful to keep his wrist downturned, lest he shoot himself in the hand. He flipped one of the triggers on the bottom of the palm, and another arrow shot out, digging into the wood beside its brother.

"Not bad," Kenton approved as he approached.

"Thank you," Baon said, launching the final arrow. He was an excellent shot, considering he'd never used the weapon before.

Kenton stopped beside Baon, watching the man reload, eager for any distraction that took his mind off of his loss. As the warrior pumped, Kenton turned slightly, his eyes looking to where Khriss and the professors were lounging beneath the tree's shade a short distance away.

For some irrational feeling, he wanted someone to explain his pains to. He knew the desire was foolish—talking about the loss would make it no less real. Besides, he had only known her for a short time—and had treated her so poorly during that time.

Khriss caught his eye, and he immediately turned away, watching Baon fire a new series of arrows into the tree.

Khriss frowned as Kenton turned away. He still had the depressed look in his eyes, though it was more muted now.

Perhaps I'm mistaking it, she thought suddenly. *Maybe he's not sad—maybe he's just annoyed.* He was probably getting tired of her presence—he probably had better things to do than lead around

a bunch of darksiders.

Well, I don't feel sorry for him, Khriss decided. *I did save his life, after all. He owes me his life—he should be grateful to have the opportunity to help us to Lossand.*

With a nod of defiance, Khriss intentionally put Kenton out of her mind. She sighed in contentment, leaning happily against the tree, whose shade she shared with Acron and Cynder. While she wasn't exactly comfortable—it was still far too hot for that—the combination of the shade and river breeze was perhaps the most luxurious thing she had felt since arriving on the arid continent.

Still, despite the river, she was still relatively disappointed with Lossand. It wasn't nearly as lush as she had assumed it would be. The trees along the river were stumpy and twisted, and the land was more rock than it was earth. And, of course, there was still a great deal of sand.

"It isn't much different from firing a pistol," she heard Baon explain to Kenton. Khriss opened her eyes, watching as he turned his arm to the side, inspecting the weapon. Khriss knew from her own studies earlier in the day what he would see.

Though the top of the weapon was protected by an oblong, convex piece of carapace that ran from wrist to elbow. The shell ran around a group of wooden tubes and strange black chambers. The three chambers—shaped something like a pear—each fed into a thin carapace pipe, perhaps an inch in diameter. The arrows fit snugly in the tubes, the plug just behind the arrowhead forming a seal and holding the missile in place.

Baon released the pumping mechanism—a long rod that folded out of the underside of the weapon—and began to repressurize the chambers. The pump worked easily, working at an angle, like a bellows, rather than up and down. After just five or six pumps, Baon was able to reload one of the small arrows and fire again.

"Very efficient," Baon approved. "Not much power though. This wouldn't go through armor."

"Not carapace armor," Kenton agreed. "But *zinkallin* aren't meant to be used like bows. They're for short range combat, to wound your opponent before you engage him with your sword. The best Kershtian warriors, however, are good enough shots to incapacitate or kill with a single arrow."

Beside her, Acron watched the conversation with confused eyes. The large anthropologist had spent the better part of the morning inspecting the *zinkall*, and now he sat with Kenton's carapace blade lying across his lap. The blade was long and smooth—almost like it was constructed of some sort of black metal.

"What's bothering you, professor?" Khriss asked, taking a sip of water from her canteen. The river-water tasted different from vine-water—it had a more pure flavor.

Acron wiped his brow, shaking his head. "I'm having some trouble with this sword, My lady," he confessed.

"Trouble?"

"Well, we saw men in that first town carrying bows, and they apparently know how to work steel, so they appear to be in the sword-age. But, those arm weapons are almost more like crossbows, which would put them in the knight-age. Then I study this sword, which is made of carapace—which is the dayside equivalent of bone. Bone weapons are definitely from the spear-age! So, what level of technology are these daysiders? It's all terribly confusing."

Khriss frowned. "Why can't they be from all three ages?" she asked.

"My dear duchess," the fat man replied with a chuckle, "that just doesn't happen. Populations follow standard means of societal evolution. This is obviously a primitive society—it must be somewhere in the sword-age, or perhaps early knight-age. If we can determine their level of technology, then we will be able to understand their temperaments, their taboos, and their mores. Not to be effrontery, but perhaps you should have spent more time in the social sciences."

"There's one thing I never understood about that theory, dear Acron," Cynder's slow voice said from the other side of the tree. The lanky professor was laying back on the riverside grass, resting leisurely. He still wore one of his suits, though even with the number of out-fit changes he had, the clothing was beginning to look a bit dusty and dirty from their travels, not to mention the bloody tear in one of his finest jackets.

"Oh, what's that?" Acron asked.

"Well, if a society's technology evolves with its culture, then its language should do so as well. True?"

“Of course,” Acron agreed.

“Have you ever tried to learn Daysider—this Holy Kershtian, as Kenton calls it?” Cynder continued.

“I took a few courses,” Acron replied, a little more cautious.

“Well, dear man, how did you do?”

“I didn’t have much time to spend on the effort,” Acron replied with a shrug of his ample shoulders.

“Ah, then you probably didn’t have time to notice how delightfully insane the language is,” Cynder continued. “Its inflections are quite random, its order is completely backward, and many of its infixes are so complex that it takes years to even be able to read. Now, Dynastic, on the other hand, is very simple and straightforward. There are no irregularities, its order is uniform, and compared to daysider it is almost… well… primitive.”

Acron frowned, and Khriss could barely contain a snicker. One of Cynder’s favorite activities was pointing out inconsistency—though his intent was never malicious, the trait had earned him enemies amongst Elisian faculty and students alike. Few could understand that his arguments were made for the pure delight of irony, rather than intent to ridicule.

Acron, fortunately, was not one so easily offended. He simply laughed at Cynder’s remark, shrugging to himself. Acron was not a stupid man, but Cynder’s level of satire was usually lost on him—which was probably the main reason the two were able to remain friends. The anthropologist just took Cynder’s comments as being odd and incomprehensible, and laughed them away as personality quirks rather than trying to understand them.

Acron was still laughing when a massive form bent over him, picking up the carapace sword. “I can answer one question for you,” Baon informed, holding up the sword. “I don’t care what it’s made from—this is not a primitive weapon.”

“I say, dear man,” Acron chuckled, “and by what learning do you make that judgement?”

Baon swiped the sword a few times. “I may not have much university learning, but I know weapons. Do you see how the sword is wider where blade meets hilt, tapering as it length increases? That is an advanced sword design; it balances the weapon for thrusting and backhands, creating a far superior weapon. I’ve

traveled amongst primitive peoples of darkside—their blades, when they have them, are always perpendicular to the hilts. They use swords like axes, ignoring most of the blade's potential in favor of simple hacking ability. This sword is a weapon of finesse and versatility, capable of swings in all directions."

"I'm more interested in how it was made," Khriss said, regarding the weapon. It had a keen edge, almost like it were molten-forged, like bronze. There were no signs of chipping, and the blade appeared to be one solid piece.

Kenton ducked into the tree's shade, grabbing himself a drink. "It's easy," he explained with a shrug. "The Kershtian weaponsmiths use a damp cloth, carefully forming the blade from a large chunk of carapace. They can make an extremely keen edge that way."

"But, what if your opponent throws water on you?" Baon asked with a frown.

"It wouldn't work," Kenton said with a laugh. "The swords and armor are treated after they're made, dipped in *DoKall*, which forms a sort of film on them that makes them water-resistant."

"A good thing too," Cynder noted. "It would be convenient if one's weapon melted every time it drew blood from an opponent.

Kenton chuckled. "A very good point. Though, honestly, you'll find more Kershtians with spears than swords—its a traditional Kershtian weapon. Swords are weapons for the shoed ones."

"Shoed ones?" Khriss asked.

"That's what they call Lossanders," Kenton explained. "Kershtians don't wear shoes—at least, not the ones who live on the *kerla*. They don't need them—the sand is soft, and their calluses protect them from the heat. Shoes are actually a hindrance when moving across sand—you can run much faster without them."

Kenton reached over, accepting the sword and sliding it back into place on his belt. Khriss watched him with a frown. She couldn't shake the feeling that he was sad for some reason. In pain. But, he hadn't been hurt in the attack—what could be hurting him so much that even she could see it in his eyes?

She was growing increasingly distrustful of this daysider. He seemed nice enough, but she didn't trust his answer as to why the Kershtians had tried to kill him. Trade between Lossand and the Kershtians wouldn't go on for very long if zealots ambushed ever

Lossander that tried to visit the trading towns

Baon thought the attack had something to do with the golden sash Kenton kept concealed in his belt pouch. Baon assumed that the sash marked him as an elite soldier or a nobleman. His words made sense—it was after the sash had been seen that Kenton had grown worried. However, she didn't believe that Kenton was a nobleman.

Khriss was not a master politician—she had spent too much time in her studies and away from the court. However, growing up as sole heir of one of Elis' largest estates had necessitated training in diplomacy. Kenton was no diplomat.

True, he knew how to talk his way around topics and manipulate conversations. He acted like one who was used to debate. But, as deft as he was, Kenton would never have survived in court. He was too flagrant—too intentionally rude. He was witty and capable, but far too openly arrogant. The strangest thing about him was, however, how contrived that arrogance seemed—as if he challenged authority out of habit rather than intention.

However, Khriss was certain about one thing—habit or intention, it was annoying.

"Come on," Kenton said. "We should get moving."

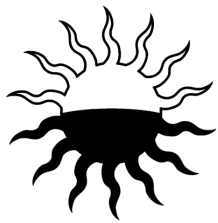
"But, we haven't even had lunch yet!" Acron protested. "I thought that's why we stopped."

"Not your lunch, their lunch," Kenton said, nodding toward the tonks. The beasts had been hobbled together beside a broad patch of sand. "Sand isn't by any means rare in Lossand, but a spot has to be a couple of inches deep for the tonks to graze. It's always a good idea to give them a chance to eat when the opportunity arises."

The weighty anthropologist groaned, casting longing eyes on the saddlebags beside him.

"You can eat on the way, Acron," Kenton said. "We're almost to Kezare—if we hurry, we could be there within a couple of days."

– 8 –



"Well, at least the food's good," Acron mumbled, tearing at a large piece of jerky—an item that made up the majority of their stores.

"You like it?" Khriss asked incredulously. The meat was heavily spiced with a strong black powder—something Kenton called *ashawen*. Apparently, it was the favored Kershtian spice, but Khriss found it nearly inedible.

"Why yes, of course," the anthropologist replied, munching happily.

"Personally," Cynder added, "I'm a little bothered by the fact that I don't know what kind of animal it comes from."

The three rode together, as usual, following Kenton, who rode in the front, with Baon alternately riding in the back, the side, or, when occasion suited him, scouting ahead. The warrior appeared relaxed, even lax, upon his mount, but his constant position shuffling proved otherwise. He was worried about the possibility of another attack, and was determined not to be surprised again. He hadn't said anything, at least not while Khriss was present, but she knew he was displeased about Kenton's closed-mouthedness.

The river beside them had broadened slightly as they moved, and it now stretched at least a hundred feet across. They had been riding along it for two days now, and it was growing steadily larger.

It didn't appear to be very deep, but the current was swift in places. Earlier in the day they had seen the first signs of human habitation here in Lossand. The villages were small and compact, settled between the river and occasional patches of sandy soil. The crops they grew looked more like what would be found on darkside, as opposed to the strange under-sand vegetables that came from the *kerla*.

However, she was quickly coming to understand why Lossand was considered the desert. The crops were stumpy and short, and there was little livestock. The Kershtian villages they had passed had been both larger and better protected, and the people had looked richer. It had been hard for Khriss to see at the time—she was used to darkside colors and flamboyancy—but now that she had something to compare, she realized that the Kershtians were very well off, despite their lack of extravagance. The Kershtian tents had been well-maintained and their insides plush. The people had been clean and well-fed, and many of them had appeared to have at least some leisure time.

It wasn't that the Lossandin people were poor—they just weren't as wealthy. The buildings—often stone or mud—didn't appear as comfortable as Kershtian tents, and the people were always busy working beneath the hot sun, caring for their sickly plants.

The more she watched, the more she became certain that her darkside learning wouldn't apply on dayside. Acron had been wrong when he'd assumed Khriss didn't know the social sciences. Khriss had taken quite a number of anthropology classes—she liked all kinds of science, though the physical disciplines had always been her strongest area of study. Darkside logic said that a culture who lived in tents and used bone weapons couldn't possibly be advanced as one that lived in homes and had access to iron. Yet, the exact opposite appeared to be true here on dayside.

"Well, I don't care what it is," Acron was mumbling as he reached for another piece of jerky. "It's good. That's all that matters."

Khriss frowned, watching him chew. The jerky was different from what she had eaten on darkside. It was much softer, for one thing. It was stringy and dull brown, kind of like darkside jerky, but it didn't come in cut strips but flat round discs, almost like loafs.

Cynder chuckled beside her. “Shall I warn our poor dayside friend that he’s about to suffer another interrogation?”

Khriss blushed. “What do you mean?” she asked, trying to play innocent.

“Oh, come now, duchess,” Cynder chided. “I had you in far too many classes to mistake that look. What are you curious about this time?”

“The jerky… or whatever it is,” Khriss said. “You’re right—we don’t know where it comes from. It must be from a sandling of some sort, but what part? Certainly not the shell. But that means there must be soft flesh underneath, and soft flesh requires water—which I thought was poisonous to sandlings. In fact, I still can’t accept that they’re all hydrophobic. What kind of creature could exist without water? Do they not have blood?”

Cynder smiled, his aged eyes twinkling with mirth. “Well, those are good questions, I suppose. And, the Divine be thanked, for once I’m not on the receiving end. Go and ask—but, on second thought, don’t tell me what you find out. I have a feeling I’d rather not know where that jerky comes from—at least, not until we get to a place where there are other options to choose from.”

Khriss ignored his jibes—mostly because they were so well-placed. She tried to hold herself back, but now that the curiosity had gotten hold of her, she found it impossible to ignore. Eventually, beneath the elderly linguist’s knowing eyes, she hammered her tonk forward to confront Kenton.

The daysider rode alone, his expression thoughtful, even regretful. The dark sense of despair that had seemed to hover behind his eyes since the attack a few days ago was still there. In his hand was a bit of sand that he absently rubbed against his palm—a nervous habit of his. She had seen him do it before when he was deep in thought.

Kenton looked up as she approached, then groaned audibly.

“Oh, stop it,” she huffed. “You’ll be rid of us soon enough.”

“The sands willing…” Kenton mumbled. “What is it this time?”

“The jerky,” Khriss said. “I want to know where it comes from.”

“Jerky?” Kenton asked.

Khriss pulled a piece out of her saddlebags. The floppy piece of meat was flexible and soft to the touch—and, unfortunately, she

could smell the pungent *ashawen* that coated it.

"Oh, the *ZaiDon*," Kenton said. "It comes from sandlings, of course."

"Yes," Khriss said, "but what part? Do they have flesh underneath?"

"No, it comes from the entire thing. The entire sandling."

Khriss frowned. "How?"

"Like this," Kenton said, pulling out his canteen. He waited for a few moments, watching the ground. Eventually, he saw one of the ever-present tiny bug-like sandlings scuttle from one patch of sand toward another. Kenton poured, dumping a shower of water on the creature. It immediately began to shake, jerking and squirming in the deadly rain. Khriss turned, watching the little creature as they passed. It bubbled and boiled, and a few seconds later it was nothing more than a greenish-brown puddle on the ground.

Kenton replaced his canteen, taking another pinch of sand from the pouch at his side and absently rubbing it between his fingers.

"See?"

Khriss sat on her tonk, looking behind her at the receding puddle of goo. Suddenly she felt very sick. "You mean…?"

"You take sandling pus, churn it in a tub for a few hours, then let it dry in the sun. *ZaiDon* is a staple food, Khriss. We eat it with every meal. Of course, some forms of *ZaiDon* are so tasteless that we usually spice it as it's drying. What's wrong?"

Khriss barely kept her stomach under control. "I… On darkside we aren't accustomed to eating squished bugs."

"Bugs?" he said, obviously translating the word in his mind. "But, when they actually make *ZaiDon,* they use large sandlings—creatures like tonks. Of course, tonks don't taste very good—other sandlings make better *ZaiDon*. Either way they aren't 'bugs.' They're far too big."

Khriss shook her head. "The word doesn't necessarily just refer to size," she informed. "Regardless, I…" she trailed off, frowning. Something was wrong. It took her a moment to pick it out, and when she did she wondered why she it had seemed so odd to her. The sand in Kenton's palm had turned black. He must have gotten some water on his hands when he opened the canteen.

"What?" Kenton asked.

“Nothing,” Khriss said.

Kenton frowned, still rubbing the sand as if he had forgotten it was there. “No, really. What?”

“The sand in your fingers,” Khriss said with a blush. “It was white just a few moments ago. You must have—”

Kenton yelped in surprise, nearly dropping the sand as if it had suddenly bitten him.

“What!” Baon demanded, hammering his tonk forward, a pistol in one hand, sword in the other.

“Oh, uh, nothing,” Kenton sand nervously, still staring down at his hands. “I… thought I saw something.”

Baon didn’t look convinced. He did, however, let the matter drop as he put away his pistol and pulled out the spyglass instead. “Here,” the warrior said, handing the glass to Kenton. “I saw this right before you screamed. Look downriver.”

Kenton raised the glass hesitantly to his eye—he had used the glass before, but obviously didn’t know what to make of its ability to see great distances.

“I assume that’s where we’re going?” Baon asked.

Kenton nodded, lowering the glass, intentionally handing it past Khriss’ waiting hand to Cynder, who had ridden up beside her. The linguist smiled, but refrained from taking a look, handing it to Khriss instead.

With a growl at Kenton, she raised the glass to her eyes. There, barely visible on the horizon, was what looked like a large island rising out of the middle of the river.

Kenton hammered his tonk forward, moving ahead of the others. The darksiders probably assumed the move came from his excitement to get home. In actuality, sighting Kezare meant little to him. Home it was, but he had actually begun to loath returning—coming back to Kezare would mean revealing his loss of power to the remaining sand masters.

But, maybe not… Kenton clutched the bit of black sand in his fist, hesitantly allowing himself to hope once again. After the last battle he had surrendered hope, for hope had become to painful. It appeared, however, that the emotion was too resilient to destroy, even intentionally.

It was probably the water, he told himself as he moved away

from Khriss and the others. *You're just going to disappoint yourself again.* But, hope moved him forward anyway. Hope led him to reach down and pull a fistful of sand from his sand pouch—worn now out of habit, rather than necessity. It was hope that shone believingly in his eyes as he hesitantly commanded the sand to obey.

And it did.

He nearly leapt from his saddle—half in joy, half in shock—when the sand suddenly burst into radiance. It sat in his hand, warm and familiar, glowing with its shifting mother-of-pearl light. His ability was not gone, it had only lain dormant for a time—a supposed impossibility.

Kenton sat stunned for a long moment, staring at the sand. He had always cursed his small talent, but these last few days without had been excruciating. One ribbon may not be very much compared to other sand masters, but it was infinitely better than no ribbons at all.

In a daze of contentment, Kenton began to move the sand out of his hand, spinning it in a very small pattern before him. Then he frowned—something was wrong. No, not wrong… just different. During his years as a sand master, he had grown accustomed to the draining effects of sand mastery—it could be as taxing on a man's body as physical labor. Perhaps it was just because he had gone so long without mastering, but it seemed like the sand was…

"Kenton?" a feminine voice asked.

He jumped, hurriedly letting the ribbon fall stale.

Khriss's tonk caught up to his own a few moments later. The darksider's face was suspicious. "What are you looking at?" she demanded.

"Nothing," Kenton said, letting the black sand slide from his fingers.

She watched the action with thin eyes, then turned up to stare at his face, searching for answers. "All right, daysider. What's going on?"

"What do you mean?" Kenton asked innocently.

"Those Kershtians attacked us just to get to you. For some reason, they thought you were so dangerous they only sent one of their men against Baon, but they sent six against you. Now, you

seem mystified by bits of sand. What are you hiding?”

Kenton almost told her. There was really no reason to keep it hidden—she would find out about the sand masters soon enough. As he looked up to speak, however, his eyes fell on her face. Her authoritative, demanding face. So much like Praxton and the mastrells. As his mouth opened, he found himself hesitating.

“What am I hiding?” he finally said, his reflexes taking over. “Well, certainly not the fact that you annoy me, dear Khrissalla of darkside. In fact, how do you know it was me they were trying to kill? I seem to remember warning someone, back in that village, that she should pay more attention to Kershtian customs, lest she offend the ‘savages.’ Retribution comes swiftly among us primitive people—I wouldn’t be surprised if those men were hired to come after us by the merchant whose home you offended by breaking tradition.”

“I—” Khriss said, shocked, her face growing red. She obviously didn’t believe him, but there was enough possibility to his words that she couldn’t be certain. She stuttered for a moment, then hammered her tonk to the side, fleeing back to her darkside companions.

By the sands, how could I be so cruel?, Kenton thought in amazement. *What have I become?*

His fight against the Diem had made him strong, but the constant effort had produced side-effects. Since he had become a sand master every moment of his life had been a struggle. Nearly every other Diem member had been an enemy—or, at least, someone to whom he needed to justify his continued defiance of the mastrells. Kenton had worked hard to gain what support he had. Instead of just responding to his accusers, Kenton had needed to make them seem like fools, for the entire Diem had been watching. But, somewhere during the struggle, the cynicism had become a part of him. He was a rebel—not necessarily because he needed to be, but because he had been one for so long.

“He seems to get endless joy from infuriating me,” Khriss fumed. Only years of dealing with courtly back-stabbing kept the tears from showing on her face. “He attacked me for no reason. What did I do to deserve this? Save him from dehydration? Perhaps the Divine intended for him to die, and now they’re punishing me for

interfering. And why am I talking to you anyway? You don't care."

Baon raised an eyebrow. "No, I don't care," he agreed. "That's probably why you're talking to me."

Khriss looked back toward Kenton, who was riding a good distance in front of the rest of them. They should have left him days ago—the darksiders could have followed the river on their own. They didn't need a guide any more.

"I must have said something truthful—something that made him uncomfortable," she decided.

"Or, maybe you just asked something he couldn't answer," Baon said with a shrug.

"What?"

"People get annoyed when you ask questions they don't know the answers to. It makes them feel insufficient. And, duchess, with the number of questions you ask, the odds are definitely against the daysider."

Khriss snorted at the comment, falling silent. The truth was, however, that she couldn't remain annoyed for long—not when they were so close to their destination. Kezare was a city of legends on darkside, a mystical place where the sand mages ruled.

She was encouraged to see that it really was on an island, like the stories said. The river split directly in the middle, birthing a massive rock of an island that was bulging with tents and buildings. The land on the banks to either side of Kezare was obviously more fertile than what they had passed so far—it was covered with farms, though the crops were still poor compared to darkside standards.

In addition, the river got even bigger here. As they approached, Khriss could see a second, smaller river merging with the Ry'Do Ali. If her map were to be believed, its origin could be found in the mountains to the east, the only of their kind on the continent other than the single peak at the center of the *kerla*. Here, in the pseudo-lake surrounding Kezare, she saw ships on the water for the first time. Most of the riverboats were small, but a couple were more massive, probably cargo vessels.

Kenton allowed them to catch up as they approached the city. Smaller towns lined the banks of the river, most of them little more than a dock and a few clay structures. It was to one of these that Kenton led them. He rode straight up to the river bank, then told

them to wait beside their animals as he negotiated with one of the sailors—a man with lighter Lossandin skin, as opposed to Kershtian olive.

A moment later he returned, handing Khriss a small pouch of coins. “I’ve traded him your tonks for this,” he explained.

“What?” Khriss demanded. “I didn’t tell you to do that!”

“And?” Kenton said with a chuckle. “Were you intending to take them with you?”

“Why not?” Khriss asked.

“Across water?” Kenton asked with a raised eyebrow. “That wouldn’t be a very good idea. Tonks go wild whenever they’re put onto a ship—I don’t know how they can tell they’re near water, but they can. Even if they couldn’t, all it would take would be one leak or splash to drive the whole lot of them into a stampede. And, if you did get them across, there wouldn’t be anything for them to eat. There’s not much sand in Kezare.”

“But, how do we travel around the city?” Khriss asked.

“You walk,” Kenton said. “Or, I suppose, you can hire a carriage if you must. Either way, the tonks stay here. A ferry ride across the river was also part of the deal. From there, the man’s son will lead you to Lonzare.”

“Lonzare?” Khriss asked.

“The darksider section of Kezare. You’ll probably want to find rooms there.”

“But, what about you?”

Kenton smiled. “I thought you wanted to get rid of me.”

“I do,” Khriss informed. “I just… oh, never mind.”

“Then this is farewell, Khrissalla,” Kenton said with a nod. “I have… things I need to attend to.”

With that, he nodded his farewells to Baon, Acron, and Cynder, then left them standing on the docks, the Lossandin sailor gesturing for them to board his boat.

Kenton rushed along the riverbank, the darksiders forgotten for the time being. Now that he was so close, his eagerness was taking control of him—he needed to know who among his comrades had survived.

The Diem itself wasn’t in Kezare, but on the lake shore a short distance away from where he had dropped off the darksiders. He

made the trip quickly, barely letting himself wonder who would be dead and who would be alive.

Soon, he topped a small hill, and his eyes fell on the Diem itself. He paused for a moment, despite his anxiety, to stare at the building that he had called home for the last eight years. Large and fortress-like, the building that was the Diem seemed to be part of sand surrounding it. And, in reality, such wasn't far from the truth.

The building was an enigma—it was older than the sand masters, or, at least, their formal organization. It had been formed from a single, enormous block of white sandstone. Yet, unlike normal sandstone, the Diem's walls and floors could not be chipped or worn away. It was permanent, eternal.

Kenton stood, the ever-present wind ruffled his robes, bringing with it the familiar scents of Kershtian cooking and lakewater. The sun sat about twenty degrees down from the apex, resting in its familiar place, the place that felt right. The sand masters's power, like the building before him, had seemed eternal. They had been broken, betrayed and destroyed through the warping of their own powers. It was possible that not a single one of them had…

Kenton stopped, forcing himself not to think of such a possibility. Others had survived. The thought firmly in his mind, he descended toward the block-like Diem. He walked straight up the road toward its front, striding up its sandstone steps and through the doorless gate.

As soon as he entered, his resolve wavered slightly. The Diem was silent. He stood in the entry hall, a massive, open room that stretched up for two stories. The room was bright—besides the inner hallways, there wasn't a place in the Diem that didn't have windows. But, for some reason, it felt dark.

Rich tapestries swung on the walls, giving way before the wind. The room's only sound was that of the long pieces of cloth slapping against the stone walls. Paintings watched him. The murals on the back wall, depictions of Lossand's eight Professions, seemed faded and subdued. The ground, like all of the Diem's floors, was covered with a few inches of white sand.

Kenton shivered. The entry chamber was the Diem's main entryway; it had always been busy. Whether it had been acolents running toward their rooms, or undermastrells yelling for them to

act properly, the entry chamber was a place for meeting and socializing. With thousands of Diem members, there was always at least someone there.

And now it was empty. Kenton took a step forward, walking tentatively, as if he were on deep sand. Then he moved more quickly, more urgently, if only to make more noise himself. Beyond the entry chamber he entered the dark inner hallway. Unlit lamps lined the walls, but several open chamber doors provided some light.

The inner hallway extended tunnel-like in either direction, the occasional open door lending it a ghostly, quiet light. The hallway circled the rectangular perimeter of the Diem. From it, one could reach every room on the ground floor—the Diem's center was a large open courtyard.

The hallway should have been lit. It was the main area of traffic in the building. Now alarmed, Kenton chose a direction and began to stride down the hallway, throwing open doors as he moved. He passed the large conference room that sat behind the entry chamber and moved on to the smaller rooms that lined the hallway on both sides. He exposed living chambers and classrooms alike, each one empty.

Kenton searched frantically, calling out as he worked. Eventually, he found himself back where he had begun—he had traveled the entire perimeter of the Diem.

Stupefied, he wandered back into the entry hall. It was true—the Diem was empty. He couldn't know for certain, of course, for he couldn't check the two upper stories. The Diem had no stairs—those who didn't have sand mastering ability couldn't visit the chambers of the mastrells and other high-ranking sand masters.

Still, Kenton knew that even if he could get up to those floors, he would find the rooms empty. His yell-accompanied searching had been loud; they would have heard him. He had even stuck his head into the inner courtyard and called out for an answer. There had been none.

He was the last sand master. The possibility that he had forced himself not to consider had occurred. What would he do? Could the Diem continue with one member?

Kenton slumped against a sandstone wall, letting himself slide

down to the floor. He stared forward sightlessly, disbelievingly. How many times had he wished that he didn't have to deal with the mastrells? How many times had he speculated about how much could be done for the Diem if the old leadership were gone? He had fought them for eight years, but now there was no one left to fight.

No one to tell him he wasn't good enough. No one to snicker behind his back as he passed. No one to impress with how much he could do with a single ribbon. No one to meet for lunch, to talk about how far they had come. No one to be his friend, despite their difference in ranks. No brothers left, spiteful or encouraging.

Kenton's head fell to his hands. What would he do now?

"Kenton?" a hesitant voice asked.

Kenton looked up with shock, bumping his head against the wall behind him. Standing in the large gateway was a familiar form.

"Dirin?" Kenton asked with amazement.

The flame-haired boy rushed into the room. He wore his sand master's robes and the white sash of an acolent.

"Kenton, you're alive!" the boy exclaimed. "We thought for certain that—"

"We?" Kenton interrupted. "There are others?"

Dirin paused. "Well, yes. Of course. Oh, but you wouldn't know, would you?"

Kenton leapt to his feet. "Where, Dirin? Where is everyone?"

"At the Hall," Dirin explained, examining Kenton's face with a frown. "Are you all right?"

"The Hall of Judgement?" Kenton asked. "Why?"

"The Taishin have met, Kenton," Dirin explained. "They need to ratify a new Lord Mastrell."

"A new Lord Mastrell…" Kenton said, his eyes opening wide. "Who?"

But somehow he already knew the answer.

"Drile," Dirin replied.

Kenton cursed. "Come on," he said, moving to rush out of the Diem.

"Wait," Dirin requested. The boy rushed away, then returned a few moments later, a golden sash from the supply room in his hands. "Terr sent me to get this," he explained sheepishly. "We're going to give it to Drile when he leaves the Hall. It wouldn't be

right for the Lord Mastrell not to have one."

Kenton frowned. "You won't need it," he informed.

"None of the mastrells survived," Dirin explained, speaking with the excitement of a youth with news to tell. "Except maybe Drile, who isn't quite a mastrell anymore."

Kenton nodded, hurrying through the small riverside town. They needed to get a boat to Kezare as quickly as possible. "How did you survive?" he asked.

Dirin shrugged. "I don't know, really. After the Lord Mastrell's final attack, the Kershtians only fired a few more arrows, then retreated. Most of them ignored the acolents—over half of us survived. The higher, ranks, though…"

"They must have known which sash colors to aim for," Kenton assumed as they walked onto the docks. "Wait here."

A boatman, a Lossandin man with dark enough hair that he might have had some Kershtian blood in him, approached as Kenton strode forward. "We need passage," Kenton explained. "As quickly as possible."

"Two lak," the man said, "and I'll have you there in less than five degrees."

Kenton froze. He had given all of the money to Khriss and the others, assuming he wouldn't need it once he returned to the Diem.

"I…" Kenton trailed off.

"No money?" the man assumed with a snort, turning.

Kenton watched him go. Always before, he had been able to request money from the Diem for whatever expenses he had. What did he do if there was no one to distribute money?

Then, reaching down to his belt, Kenton realized something. "Wait!" he exclaimed.

The man turned, and Kenton pulled out the golden mastrell's sash. The man's eyes opened wide, then immediately turned down toward the ground, and he fell to one knee. "*KeemTo*!" he said, the Kershtian word for 'master.' "I did not know… I mean, I thought you were all…"

Murmurs came from all around him as other dock patrons and workers saw the golden sash. Everywhere Kenton looked, people averted their eyes, some bowing, others scurrying away, and more than a few making Kershtian wardings against evil with their hands.

Kenton watched it all with a measure of shock—people had been suspicious of him when he was an acolent, but he had never received a reaction such as this. Mastrells rarely left the Diem, and when they did they traveled by carriage—Kenton hadn't realized what an effect the golden sash would have on those around him.

The dockman remained kneeling before him, sweat on his brow, his arms shaking slightly.

"I still need passage," Kenton said slowly.

"Yes, *KeemTo*. Immediately." The man hopped up, running over to a small boat.

Kenton followed more slowly, allowing Dirin to catch up. There was surprise on the boy's face. "Kenton, you… I mean, why?"

"Why what?" Kenton asked, climbing on the boat.

Dirin regarded the dockman with careful eyes, then continued in a low voice. "Why imitate a mastrell? You know the punishment for that? I mean, I know you want to get to Kezare…" the boy trailed of with a blush, as if he had gone too far in his accusation.

"Imitating…?" Kenton asked as the dockman moved them out onto the lake and began to row for Kezare. "Dirin, the Lord Mastrell himself gave me this sash right before the attack. Weren't you paying attention?"

Dirin lowered his eyes sheepishly. "Of course I was, Kenton, but… well, you wouldn't know, because you always walk right up to the front. The rest of us can't do that. It's very hard to hear in the back—the lower ranks never know what's happening up front. Most of us are short enough that we can't even see. I heard that you'd… picked up Drile's sash and taken it for yourself, but no one actually thought, I mean, the Lord Mastrell said he would never…"

Kenton sat dumbfounded on the boat's wooden plank, thinking back to the events right before the Kershtian attack. The last days had been so chaotic that it was hard to remember—he knew that Praxton had told him to pick up the sash, but had he ever announced Kenton's advancement to the rest of the Diem?

"Dirin, who besides students survived the attack?"

"Some underfens, a couple dozen fens, and fourteen Diemfens."

Too low, Kenton realized. *All of them would be so far back that they wouldn't have been able to see or hear. I was advanced, but there's no one alive who can prove it.*

“Oh,” Dirin added. “I almost forgot—Elorin survived too, but…”

“Elorin?” Kenton asked with excitement. “He was there, up at the front!”

“Yes,” Dirin agreed. “But, well… he isn’t here.”

“Why not?” Kenton demanded. “He should be leading the Diem! He’s the highest ranking sand master left.”

“He’s not a sand master anymore,” Dirin said softly. “He overmastered like everyone who died, but his powers were burned away. He can’t even master a single ribbon.”

Kenton grew cold. “Elorin, burned out?”

Dirin nodded. “He was the one who organized the refugees and led us back to Kezare, but once he got here, he left. He said the sight of the Diem was too much for him, now that he…”

Kenton closed his eyes, shaking his head. Only a few hours before he had assumed such would be his own fate—he knew well the despair that came from losing one’s ability to master sand. He probably would have done what Elorin did, had things remained unchanged. Except, for some reason his powers had returned. Why?

The boat pulled into dock, and the dockman hopped out, quickly tying the moorings. He then bowed subserviently as Kenton and Dirin climbed out. He demanded no payment, but instead boarded his vessel in silence. Kenton noticed a look of relief on his face as he rowed away from the city. Relief, and something else, something carefully hidden. Resentment.

“Come on,” Kenton said, watching the dockman with distracted eyes. “We need to get to the Hall of Judgement.”

The Hall of Judgement was a massive pyramidal structure. Cut from dark black marble, it was the organizational center for Lossand’s trackts and judges, much in the same way that the Diem headquartered the sand masters. There was a massive crowd around its front steps, many of them wearing the white robes of sand mastery. The people spoke with hushed voices, and even from a distance Kenton could feel their anxiety. The selection of a new Taisha—leader of one of Lossand’s eight Professions—was a very important event, especially when that Taisha was the Lord Mastrell.

Kenton hung back from the crowd, waiting in the half-shadows beside an earthen building. He leaned against the hardened clay, feeling oddly hesitant after his rush to arrive. The crowd was

packed so thickly that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to push his way through. Of course, there was one easy way to force them apart—few people would stand in the way of a mastrell.

He had put the golden sash away after leaving the docks. The people's reactions had made him uncomfortable—in all his years of seeking the golden sash, he had never associated it with the power that most sand masters probably coveted. He had wanted to be a mastrell primarily to prove his father wrong. Now that he had it, he was seriously considering throwing it away.

He could do it. No one alive had heard Praxton advance him. Others might call him a fool for doing so, but Kenton had seen the faces of the sand masters who had been at the front of the crowd. He had felt their envy, and their indignation. He didn't deserve the sash, and they all knew it.

"Kenton?" Dirin asked, his voice confused. The young acolent stood beside him in the alley. "Are we going to go forward?"

"I…" Kenton paused. "I don't know," he admitted.

"But, you have to stop him!"

"Who?" Kenton asked.

"Drile!" Dirin explained. "They're going to make him Lord Mastrell. He's in there now—he's the only one the Taishin let in."

"Maybe Drile should be Lord Mastrell," Kenton mumbled. "He is the most powerful, after all."

"But—" Kenton held up a hand to cut the boy off. "I didn't mean it," he said with a shake of his head. "Trust me, I know Drile far better than you. We were acolents together. He'll make a despot of a Lord Mastrell—I couldn't think of a worse choice, no matter how powerful he is. The problem is, I don't see what we can do about it."

"But, Kenton," Dirin began, "you're a mastrell. You should be Lord Mastrell."

Kenton frowned. "I thought you didn't believe me," he said.

Dirin looked up, his eyes wide and honest, like always. "I didn't hear Lord Praxton advance you, but I believe you. If you said he gave you the sash, then he did. Besides, anyone would be better than Drile."

Kenton looked down at the acolent's encouraging eyes. Sometimes the boy was so optimistic it was sickening. Kenton shook

his head, looking back at the mass of people before the Hall. Most of them weren't as ingenuous as Dirin—would they believe him? Probably not. Kenton had too much of a history of being a rebel to have any credibility. Besides, did he really want them all to treat him like the Lord Mastrell? They would fear him, and hate him, him even more than if he were just a simple mastrell.

"No," he said quietly. "Dirin, I don't deserve this sash. Praxton gave it to me out of spite, not because he thought I should be a mastrell."

"You deserve it," Dirin countered. "Kenton, you always said you worked harder, did more with what you had, than any other sand master. You said that should measure who became a mastrell and who didn't."

Kenton shook his head. "I lied, Dirin," he said frankly. "I didn't fight to be a mastrell because I thought I deserved it, I did so to spite my father. I knew it would embarrass him. That's why I kept turning down his advancement offers, not because of any moral belief."

Dirin fell silent. Kenton turned away from the Hall, stepping quietly down the alleyway, walking away. He had fought and won, but only now did he realize that he had been fighting the wrong battle.

"I almost left the Diem, you know," Dirin said. He spoke quietly, as if speaking to himself. "I was so weak, and everyone else so strong. I could barely make sand glow—let alone move it around. I always thought, what good will I be? I'm useless."

Kenton paused in the shadows, brick walls on either side of him. He didn't turn around, but he didn't keep going either.

"I'm still an acolent," Dirin continued, his voice almost a whisper. "I'm sixteen. Do you know that, Kenton? Do you know how old I am? I know I don't look like it—Talloners are short. I guess that makes it easier for everyone to ignore the fact that I should have been offered a sash two years ago."

Kenton closed his eyes. He had wondered, on occasion, why Dirin was still an acolent, but he hadn't ever asked. The boy had never been called up for advancement.

"I don't think Praxton was ever planning on giving me a sash," Dirin explained. "He tried to forget about me. I can barely make

sand glow. Even after all these years, I can barely do anything. I'm the weakest sand master who ever lived. At times, I got so depressed that a nearly gave up. I nearly left the Diem on a dozen separate occasions."

Dirin paused. In a moment, he finally continued. "But, every time I thought that, I would see you. Here was a sand master barely more powerful than I, but somehow he has managed to become the focus of everyone's attention. He does things even mastrells can't do, and he speaks back to the upper ranks with pride, despite his apparent lack of strength. Everyone in the Diem respects you, even those who hate you. I would see you, struggling on despite everything and everyone, and I would feel that, perhaps, I could keep going too."

Kenton lowered his head, raising one hand to feel the sand and clay brick beside him. "I'm not what you think I am, Dirin," he said, memories of his harshness to Khriss fresh in his memory.

"Can you really let him be Lord Mastrell?" Dirin asked. His voice was pleading now. "Ever since Elorin left, Drile has been lording over us like a King from the rimlands. He's been talking about hiring us out as mercenaries to fight for private armies or to defend *kelzin*. We've been afraid, but there was nothing we could do. Even with his demotion, Drile is still the highest-raking sand master alive. Except you."

Except me. He'd spend all his life struggling against the mastrells and their leader. Could he really become one of them? He wavered, part of his mind warning him that Drile couldn't be allowed to take control of the Diem, an equally strong part whispering that as bad as Drile was, Kenton might prove worse.

Absently, he reached into his sand pouch and pulled out a handful, rubbing the sand between his fingers and his palm. The thin grains were almost soft to the touch. With barely a thought, he called them to life.

The light of mastered sand instantly banished the alley's shadows. His fist glowed red as he clutched the sand, letting it seep between the cracks in his fingers to form a ribbon that wove a simple pattern in the air. The feeling he had noticed earlier, before Khriss had interrupted him, was still there. The sand felt… weak. Still, despite the odd feeling, the experience of mastering sand was

the same as it had always been.

Eight years now he had worked with the sand, coaxing every ounce of power from its grains, driving it faster, controlling it with more delicacy. All because he had wanted to prove those above him wrong, and never because of the sand itself. It was beautiful, shimmering with radiance, twisting and spinning in the air.

Perhaps it was time he actually became a sand master.

Kenton raised his head. His sand surged around him as he turned, moving in rhythm with his determination. He whipped the golden sash out of its pouch and tied it around his waist.

"All right, Dirin," he said. "I'll do it, but only to stop Drile. As soon as someone more competent can be found, I will give the Lord Mastrellship to him."

Instead of beaming in joy, however, Dirin regarded Kenton with amazement.

"What?" Kenton asked, suddenly feeling self-conscious. "You're that surprised that I didn't abandon you?"

"Kenton… look at your sand," the boy said, raising a finger.

Kenton looked up. The ribbon looked normal to him.

"The other side."

Kenton turned his head. That ribbon looked normal too—He froze. Looking back and forth between the ribbons. There were two of them, hanging separately in the air. His eyes grew wide with shock—that must have been the feeling he had experienced, the feeling of weakness from the sand.

"But, it shouldn't be possible!" he whispered.

All his life, he had only been able to master one ribbon. Sand masters didn't spontaneously gain the ability to master more—or, at least, not after they passed into maturity. All acolents started out with one ribbon, but most quickly added more—at a rate of about one every few months—until they hit their limit.

Then, they stopped, never gaining more. For most sand masters, this happened long before their advancement, though mastrells continued to grow on after being granted their sash. All hit an upper limit, however, even mastrells. Through practice a sand master could increase the amount of sand his ribbons could hold, but never how many ribbons he could control.

Yet, Kenton had done just that. Experimentally, he moved the

ribbons around. They obeyed, moving separately when he commanded. The movements were awkward—like tying to control two arms doing separate tasks—but they did obey. Between the time of the battle and the time he regained his powers, his abilities had changed somehow. It wasn't supposed to be possible—but, of course, the books also said that once a sand master burned away his power, it never came back.

"How…?" Dirin asked.

"I don't know," Kenton confessed. He reached out a tentative hand, commanding one of the ribbons to split. And it did.

"Three?" Dirin whispered in disbelief.

Kenton commanded again, but the ribbon resisted. He struggled to make it split, but he ran up against a familiar wall—he had tried unsuccessfully for eight years to control two ribbons at once. He strained, trying to bend the sand to his will, and finally succeeded in splitting the ribbon in two—but as he did one of the other ribbons immediately fell stale, dropping to the ground.

"It looks like three is the limit," Kenton said with bafflement. Controlling all three at once was difficult, but no more so than one had been for him just a short time before.

"It is a sign," Dirin said quietly.

"A sign from whom?" Kenton said with a snort. "Have you suddenly converted to *Ker'Reen*?"

Dirin blushed sheepishly, but his eyes continued to glimmer as he looked at Kenton's ribbons.

Kenton turned, looking out of the alley at the collection of sand masters and townspeople waiting for the inevitable announcement of Drile's ascension to the Taisha.

The Council isn't going to like this, Kenton thought as he prepared to step out of the alleyway. Of course, they were used to dealing with him. He had petitioned them on four separate occasions, attempting to use the Law against his father. He had lost all four petitions to nearly unanimous votes.

Hopefully, this time would break the trend. He would hate to have motivated himself so heroically only to fail.

"Well, Dirin," he mumbled. "If you've suddenly decided to become religious, you might want to say a prayer for me. This is going to take some serious divine intervention."

And with that he stepped forward, his three ribbons of sand whirling around his body.

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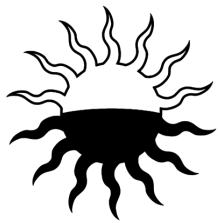


Khriss watched Kenton walk away, disappearing around a corner without giving the darksiders a second look. She stared distractedly for a moment, allowing the boatman to herd her onto his tiny vessel, before snorting and seating herself.

"I knew he would abandon us," she informed to no one in particular.

"You sound disappointed," Cynder replied, seating himself beside her with a chuckle. "Weren't you complaining just a short while ago about his continued presence in our company?"

"I'm happy to see him go," Khriss defended. "I just thought it rather abrupt of him to leave us here, after all we've done for him."

Cynder just silently raised his eyes to the heavens as the daysider boatman began to row them across the lake.

Khriss turned from the insufferable linguist, intent on forgetting about Kenton and turning her attention back to her task. She had crossed the desert—which apparently wasn't a desert at all—and found her way to Kezare, capital of Lossand. The city was to have been Gevin's final destination. She had to find out what had happened to him after he got to the city—assuming, of course, that he had even made it this far. He could have very easily died crossing the sands; Khriss and her group nearly had.

Khriss shook her head. She had to assume that Gevin had

arrived at Kezare. There was something about the prince—something about his obstanance—that told her he would have made it to his destination. Even if inquiries had told him the Sand Mages weren't real, he would have pressed on to Kezare. He would have had to prove his failure to himself.

But how was she going to discover anything? Her only means of communication had just run off, leaving her party once again to the mercies of its own linguistic ability. Cynder had spent a number of hours during their trip interrogating Kenton about dayside languages, but the elderly linguist still had only a passing grasp on daysider. In addition, the tongue Cynder and Khriss had learned was what Kenton called Formal Kersha, language of Kershtian religious services. Khriss's group had absolutely no experience with the tongue Kenton called 'Lossandin.'

Khriss made little progress with her doubts as they crossed the lake—though Acron nearly succeeded in capsizing them on two separate occasions when he tried to stand and get a better view of the approaching city. The small dayside boat was not designed to deal with someone of the anthropologist's girth. They arrived without misfortune, however. Khriss took Acron's hand as he offered it to help her from the boat, and Baon quietly gathered up their baggage—making no complaints at having become the de facto packman.

Kezare was not as she had pictured it. True, it was on an island, like the books said, but it was far from what she would have called grand. The buildings were mostly clay or stone, and tended to be blockish. Many of them were multi-storied, and their size combined with the narrow streets to give the island an overloaded feeling, like a bag that was packed so full it was about to burst. The buildings almost seemed to be pushing one another into the lake, some running right up to the water's edge. Over all it looked less grand than it did crowded, dirty, and loud.

Acron, apparently, disagreed with her.

"It's amazing," the hefty anthropologist breathed, rubbing his short beard. "It is like we've traveled back in history! Not a single building made from wood. And look, none of the roofs are peaked—though, I suppose that makes sense, what with the lack of snow. I wonder how they deal with sanitation? And transportation—the

roads are so packed with bodies. Do you suppose everybody really walks?"

Acron continued to babble as the boatman tied their boat, then began calling in Lossandin toward a stone cottage just beyond the wooden docks. When there was no reply, he grumbled to himself, bowed to the darksiders, then went jogging toward the building.

"Should we follow?" Khriss asked.

"Not unless you want to help me carry all of this," Baon replied, setting the last of their saddlebags in a pile on the docks. "I suspect he will return—Kenton did say he had arranged to have us transported somewhere."

"Lonzare," Khriss said with a nod. "Though he didn't bother to explain what it was. That man is insufferable."

"We will find out soon enough, I suspect," Baon replied, shrugging.

"Aren't you even curious?" Khriss asked. "He could be sending us anywhere."

"Wondering won't get us there any more quickly."

"Yes, but…" Khriss trailed off, realizing she wasn't going to get anywhere with Baon. The mercenary simply refused to be properly curious. So, to alleviate her own frustration, she turned to another topic. "What do you think of the city?" she asked, nodding toward Kezare.

Baon replied by pulling a small piece of carapace from one of his pockets—one of the fragments he had retrieved from the fallen Kershtians' armor. He dropped it off the side of the dock, letting it fall to the water with a solitary plunk. Khriss watch as it began to bubble, melting away before it could sink more than a few inches.

"The city is very well placed," Baon said. "Hard to attack, easy to defend."

"But very congested," Khriss noted.

"True," Baon agreed. "That could be good or bad, depending on how it were used. The sheer number of streets and houses would slow an enemy army—both because of confusion and because of temptation to plunder. But, the population also makes protecting the people a virtual impossibility. This would make a difficult battlefield for both sides."

"Other than the martial applications, what do you think?" Khriss

asked, looking back over the busy streets.

Baon shrugged again. “It’s a city.”

“That’s it?” Khriss asked. “That’s all you have to say?”

“For now,” Baon said.

True to Baon’s prediction the boatman returned a few moments later. Following him were a couple of burly Lossandin men and a young, dark-haired girl. Khriss frowned, trying to determine the girl’s race—she could have been either Lossandin or Kershtian. The dark hair seemed to imply Kershtian, but her skin didn’t have the olive cast to it. Of course, it was smudged with enough dirt that it was hard to tell.

The boatman smiled, pointing at the two men, then held up two fingers. “Za lak,” he said.

“Two coins,” Cynder translated. “How surprising—I actually understood him.”

“Not two coins,” the little girl corrected, speaking Dynastic with a horrible, almost indecipherable accent. “Two Lak. Can give them other coins if want, but will be paying them more than they have ever been worth.”

Cynder blinked in surprise, looking down at the little girl. Then he turned back to Khriss with a chuckle. “By the Divine—I’m wondering why I even bothered to learn this language. Everybody seems to speak Dynastic.”

“Not everyone,” the girl said. “Just me. Come.” The girl barely waited for the two packmen to pick up their baggage before darting off into the crowd.

“I guess she’s to be our guide,” Cynder observed.

“I thought Kenton said the boatman’s son would be guiding us,” Khriss said with a frown.

Cynder shrugged. “All I know is that if we don’t hurry, our possessions are likely to arrive at our destination without us.” He nodded toward the packmen, who had already started to follow the girl.

“Let’s go,” Khriss said, nodding a grateful farewell to the boatman.

Her estimation of Kezare proved correct in one area, at least. It was crowded. Khriss and the others practically had to fight to move through the mass of people. The first few minutes were horrible;

Khriss was accustomed to people giving her a great deal of room. She was, after all, of noble blood. The daysiders didn't seem to care about her personal space—they jostled, shoved, and bumped into her. The smell of their dirty, unwashed bodies was nearly enough to knock her unconscious.

Fortunately, she had Baon. Whether he noticed the look on her face or whether he simply guessed she would need room, Baon suddenly began to make space where there had previously been none. People shoved, he shoved harder. People pushed, but he was much taller—and more massive—than anything Lossand could produce. People began to notice for the first time that the body they were shoving was much larger than what they were accustomed to, and their eyes opened wide with amazement as they turned up to stare at the massive black-skinned giant that stood in their midst.

Within a few moments the crowd had pulled back, flowing around Baon like raging waters before an enormous stone. Khriss and Cynder crouched in Baon's wake—Khriss breathing deeply, Cynder humming quietly to himself.

"Thank you," she mumbled to Baon.

"Come on," the warrior simply replied, pushing his way through the crowd—which alacritously parted before him. "We'll lose our guide."

"Where's Acron?" Khriss asked, suddenly realizing she had lost track of the anthropologist.

"There," Cynder said, nodding to the edge of the crowd. Acron's large head could be seen bobbing happily underneath a colorful canopy.

Khriss considered calling out to him, but the noise of the crowd would obviously render her voice ineffectual. Fortunately, Acron began to push his bulk their direction a moment later. When he met up with them, he wore one of the Kershtian forehead medallions around his head.

"You should never have given him any money, My Lady," Cynder said with a soft groan.

"Move. Now," Baon ordered, walking forward.

The crowd thinned as they left the docks, and eventually Khriss was able to relax. She still felt nervous—there were far more people on the streets than she found comfortable—but at least they weren't

jostling into her. Her diminutive guide waited impatiently just beyond a line of tall shops with colored canopies. She didn't give Khriss a chance to ask any questions, instead turning to scamper away, leading them further into the city.

Even without the press of bodies from the market place, the city still felt cramped to Khriss. The tall buildings looked like prisoners waiting to be executed—crammed into long lines with their walls pressed close together, their postures stooped and top-heavy with balconies and canopies. Of course, the thin streets and tall buildings meant plenty of shade as relief from the sun, but Khriss wondered how anyone could survive in a city so crowded.

The streets weren't cobbled—they didn't need to be, the ground appeared to be solid rock, though there were patches and drifts of sand hiding in corners and alleys. The canopies and drapings were more colorful than what she had seen in the Kershtian towns of the *kerla*. Of course, the colors were still far from as vibrant as those of darkside, but only so much could be done with the bright sun dulling everything.

Their urchin of a guide led them gradually toward the center of the island. The land sloped upward as they walked, but before they could reach a point where Khriss could overlook the city, their guide stopped and turned down a particularly narrow alleyway.

Baon regarded the alley with a dubious look. It was small enough that his shoulders would almost touch either side. "Good place for an ambush," he noted.

Khriss snorted. "Who would want to ambush us?" she asked.

"I'm just making an observation," the warrior said before walking into the alleyway, his hand resting on his sword hilt.

Khriss followed, as did the others. A few feet down the alleyway, their guide turned and walked through what must have been an open doorway in one of the walls. When Khriss arrived, however, she discovered that the doorway looked something more like a tunnel—a vaguely squareish opening cut in the stone wall. It was large, wide and tall enough to accommodate even Baon and Acron without trouble.

Their guide stood beside the opening. "Have arrived," she informed. "Lonzare, like promised. Two Lak for packmen."

"Wait," Khriss said. "Where are we?"

“Lonzare” the girl repeated.

“Yes, but what is Lonzare?”

“Place you were going,” the girl said testily. “Pay packmen.”

Khriss frowned, peering through the dark opening. There appeared to be shadowed forms moving deep within the tunnel—perhaps Baon was right, maybe it was an ambush. Then she realized something—or, rather, she heard something. A few words, echoing through the stone tunnel. Words in Dynastic.

“You don’t suppose…?” she asked, listening closely. She could have sworn to the Divine that the voices were all speaking in Dynastic. “Come on,” she said, removing her dark glasses and waving for the group to step into the darkness.

The packmen, however, stayed where they were. The four sets of saddlebags remained on the ground.

“Won’t enter,” the girl explained. “Too dark. We aren’t blind, like you.”

“Blind?” Khriss asked.

“Lonsha,” Cynder explained. “Many of the dayside texts use that word for darksiders—it means ‘blind ones.’”

“That’s silly,” Khriss objected.

“So are people,” Cynder said with a chuckle. “Therefore, it makes sense that they would use the term.”

“Won’t enter,” the girl repeated. “I go, but packmen stay.”

Khriss sighed. “All right,” she said, poking through the coins Kenton had given her and choosing two of the red colored ones she had determined were worth the least. Apparently, these were laks. She must have guessed correctly, for the packmen accepted the coins and, without bowing a proper farewell, turned and left down the alleyway.

“Is this what I think it is?” Cynder asked.

“We’ll find out in a moment,” Khriss replied, watching as Baon struggled to pick up all four sets of bags. “Acron, help him,” she ordered.

“What?” the anthropologist asked, turning to notice Baon’s efforts for the first time. “Oh, of course.” The hefty professor moved to accept one set of bags, slinging them over his shoulders like a scarf.

They entered the tunnel hesitantly at first, following the ghostly

sounds. After a few moments they rounded a corner and entered a short-ceilinged room—or cavern, Khriss still couldn't tell which it was. It was filled with shops and people, much similar to the market near the docks except for several major differences. All of the signs were written in Dynastic, and all the people had dark skin.

Khriss stared at the scene with amazement. Darksiders mingled and mixed, travelling from shop to shop, bargaining for familiar foodstuffs and other items she hadn't seen in months. The walls were hung with colorful lanterns, illuminating the large room with soft hues that were just the right level of brightness, and the air was cool and wet—at least, compared to that outside. She almost felt like she had stepped through a door and magically traveled back to Elis.

"Amazing," Cynder mumbled. "A linguistic enclave."

"You mean a cultural enclave," Acron corrected.

Cynder raised his eyes. "We're not going to have *this* discussion again, are we?"

"They're maintaining culture first—language is only a by-product," Acron argued.

"Yes, well, I'm a linguist," Cynder countered. "That means I get to name it."

"Hush!" Khriss ordered, walking forward into the cavern. The familiar sounds of Dynastic surrounded her. This market wasn't as congested as the one outside, and its people were less-hurried, after the darksider fashion. As she walked she identified at least a half-dozen different accents—each region of darkside had its own distinct way of speaking Dynastic.

She didn't see any Elisians, however. There were quite a few black-skinned Iiarians—the largest and most powerful nation under Dynastic control—and an inordinate number of the light-skinned people of the Tiaoc states, a group of Dynastic protectorates that lay huddled along darkside's eastern shore. Of course, if anyone wanted to escape darkside, it would be the Tiaoc. Their fertile flatlands held some of the most overworked, most secluded people in the Dynasty.

"No guns," Baon whispered from beside her. Acron and Cynder had not stopped their argument at Khriss's command, but they had quieted, continuing to talk as they followed her. They seemed almost oblivious to the very wonder they were discussing. Baon,

however, watched their surroundings with keen interest.

Khriss scanned the crowd. He was right; there weren't any guns, at least not in sight. "Most of them are Tiaoc," she whispered back. "From what I've heard, the Dynasty barely lets them have horse-drawn plows, let alone firearms."

Baon nodded slowly. "This place should not exist," he mumbled.

"The Dynasty wants us to think it doesn't exist," Khriss corrected. "They don't want us to know that there is traffic between the continents."

"Shipments come every month," their guide explained in heavily-accented Dynastic.

Khriss looked up—she had almost forgotten the girl was there. "What is this place?" she asked.

"Darksider village," the girl explained. "Darksiders live here."

"I can see that," Khriss noted. "We need to talk to someone in charge—someone who might keep track of darksiders who pass through the town."

The girl paused, thinking for a moment. "Can help," she decided. "Cost ten Lak."

Khriss's eyes opened in surprise. "You little cheat! We already paid your father."

"Not daughter," girl corrected. "Couldn't find son; I substitute. Need eat, so you pay."

Baon smiled slightly. "She'd make a good mercenary," he noted as Khriss counted out ten more coins. The girl immediately began to move, dashing through the crowd. At first Khriss thought she was running away with the money, but then the girl paused, turning restlessly and waiting for them to follow.

"Not prone to extended bouts of patience, is she?" Cynder noted.

Khriss turned, shaking her head. "No, she isn't. Did you resolve your discussion?"

"No," Cynder replied. "But I did manage to confuse him enough that he thinks I won. Shall we go?"

Khriss smiled to herself, leading the group through the darkened room toward their guide—whose name she still didn't know. As soon as they got close the girl scurried away again, but Khriss refused to let herself be hurried. As she moved through the market, the place reminded her more and more of darkside. The room

resolved into corridors that almost seemed like streets. The floor was cobbled, even though it probably didn't need to be, and in some of the larger areas there were even lamp-poles bearing oil lanterns.

She still couldn't tell if they were underground or not. Some of the walls were unworked stone, but occasionally the she would see small patches of light above—as if the ceiling were constructed of wood. The place seemed to be a combination of caverns both natural and man-made. Most of the walls were obscured, however. Buildings had been built up against them—the line of houses and shops didn't even have alleys between them. They kind of reminded Khriss of tenements back in the poorer sections of Elis, though many of these buildings look rich and well-constructed.

After just a few minutes of travel, Khriss began to wish she had worn one of her gowns, rather than the tan dayside robe. She was a duchess—she should look like one. True, she had spent the last month traveling through a dust-filled desert, but everyone would still expect her to look like a duchess.

The underground system was even larger than Khriss had assumed. Their guide led them through at least a dozen different chambers and tunnels. Overall, it was probably as big as a couple of city blocks back in Elis, though it was much more spread out because of the tunnels. Eventually they passed through what was probably a residential section, darkside fungal flowers growing in rows outside the front doors. The tunnel eventually narrowed to one last door, sitting solitarily in a rock face. Like some of the buildings, this one actually seemed to be cut into the stone wall.

"Here," the girl explained. "Wait." With that she walked up to the door and, without any kind of knock or sign, opened it and entered.

Khriss and the others stood waiting as the door closed. "Fascinating," Cynder was mumbling, looking back at the dark street.

Acron shrugged. "I didn't cross the ocean to visit darkside, my dear man," the anthropologist explained. "The outside is much more interesting."

"Yes, but it isn't darkside," Cynder corrected. "This is a new culture, one in the process of blending. Why, I wouldn't be

surprised to find a contact language developing—a pidgin between Dynastic and Lossandin."

Acron scratched his head absently, jingling the medallion still hanging on his forehead. The things looked odd enough on Kershtians—Khriss thought this one looked completely ridiculous on Acron.

The door swung open a moment later, revealing a darkside man who waved them inside. Tall and thin, he wore a sword at his side and moved with relaxed motions. As they entered, Khriss noticed Baon immediately placed himself between her and the man.

The hallway inside was constructed of wood, not stone, and its walls were simple and stark save for a few lanterns. Khriss frowned. She was wrong—the walls weren't wood. They seemed to be made of carapace. Was everything on this side of the world constructed from the stuff?

Their guide led them down the hallway to another door at the end—this one much thicker. A darkside swordsman stood on either side of the door.

"Only you," the lead man said, pointing at Khriss. "The others wait outside."

Baon raised an eyebrow, looking at Khriss.

"It's all right," she said.

He sighed, but stepped aside as she walked through the second door, shooting her a look that said. *I can't protect you if you leave me behind.*

The room inside was nothing like the unfurnished hallway. The walls were hung with paintings—several of which Khriss recognized as being from famous darkside artists—and the floor was covered with a massive rug. At the back of the room there was actually a fireplace with a fire in it, though the room didn't feel any hotter than those outside.

In front of the fireplace were several large, plush darkside chairs. In one of these sat a bulbous man, fat enough to make even Acron look thin by comparison. He wore a darkside suit, cut after Iiarian versions with no tails on the coat and a girdle instead of a vest. His skin was the darkest of black, and he was smiling as she entered.

"Ah, this must be our missing Elisian duchess," he said with a

distinct, aristocratic Iiarian accent. “I am pleased to see you survived the trip unharmed.”

Khriss froze. “You know me?”

“Of you, my dear, of you,” the man said. “Though we expected you weeks ago.” His voice was deep, and as Khriss walked forward she could see a circular birthmark on his cheek. She remembered something about a birthmark…

“You!” she said suddenly. “You’re Loaten!”

“So I’m often accused,” the man said. “And, of course, I can’t deny it. Please, Duchess Khrissalla, sit down.” He indicated one of the room’s large chairs with a sweep of an overweight hand.

Khriss moved forward slowly. The fireplace appeared to have a glass front, keeping at least some of the heat out of the room. Still, it felt remarkably cool. As she approached, she also noticed that her young guide, the daysider girl, squatted in a third chair, sipping on a mug of some steaming drink.

“You’re quite famous on darkside, you know,” Khriss said seating herself. “Traitor to the Dynasty, executed—or so we’re told—for trying to murder Scythe himself.”

“Is that what they’re saying?” Loaten replied with a smile. Khriss waited for him to continue, which he did not.

“How do you know who I am?” she finally asked.

“Ah, dear Duchess,” Loaten said. “We are not completely isolated from our homeland. Information has a way of finding us.”

“But my expedition is supposed to be secret,” she said.

“Little is secret from the Dynasty, dear Duchess, especially the doings of its enemies. But, must we talk politics? I came here to escape such things—that, and to keep my head. Tell me, what do you think of our little darkside village?”

“It’s incredible,” Khriss said as an unnoticed servant approached, bringing her a steaming cup. She accepted it, the warm scent of cinnamon tea reminding her of Elis. “These are caves beneath the island?”

“Some of the city is built in caves,” Loaten said, accepting a cup for himself. “Though much of it is above ground as well. We have built coverings between buildings to block out the light. Those of us who have means pay to have ice shipped in from the mountains to the east, which keeps the air at a tolerable temperature.

“And you rule here?” she asked, then immediately cursed her lack of tact. She had never excelled at court politics, though she was good enough to recognize her comparative weakness.

Loaten laughed at the comment. “No, dear Duchess, far from it. This place was long established by the time I arrived—my little mistake only happened five years ago, you know. I just tend to keep track of what happens in darksider town—a hobby, a leftover from my old job back home. Little N’Teese tells me you come looking for information?”

“I do,” Khriss said eagerly.

“You want news of Gevin, I assume,” Loaten said, taking a sip of his tea.

“Yes,” Khriss continued. “You know something of the prince?”

Loaten continued to drink quietly, not answering her question. Finally, he spoke. “You don’t drink your tea, dear Duchess. I thought cinnamon was a favorite in Elis.”

Khriss frowned at the topic diversion. “It is,” she said slowly. “But, I’ve never liked my tea too hot, even back on darkside.”

“Wise,” Loaten noted. “You wouldn’t want to burn yourself.”

Khriss paused. He was telling her something—implying danger. What was his meaning? Suddenly, she wished she had spent more time in the court. “I need to know of the prince, whatever the cost,” Khriss informed slowly. “I will pay, if you like, for the information.”

Loaten raised his eyebrows as he sipped. “Odd you should offer,” he noted. “Money and information are really quite similar you know. Both are extremely valuable, but neither would be worth anything if everyone had all they desired. Both can also get you killed if you let it be known that you have too much.”

“Meaning?” Khriss asked.

“Meaning, dear Duchess,” Loaten said with a sigh, “that there are certain things I am not at liberty to reveal.”

“You know where the prince is,” Khriss challenged.

“After a fashion,” Loaten admitted.

“But why can’t you…?” Khriss suddenly grew cold. “Oh, Shella! The Dynasty doesn’t have him, does it?”

Loaten chuckled. “No, though their goals in regard to the young prince have been fulfilled.”

“He’s dead?” Khriss asked with horror.

Loaten shrugged. “I told you that there are certain secrets I am required to keep.”

“Required by whom?” Khriss asked.

“Myself,” Loaten explained. “Look, dear Duchess, I don’t mean to frustrate you, but I have learned through experience that rash words can prove… inconvenient.”

Khriss sighed, finally taking a sip of her tea. It was still a bit too hot for her tastes. “What can you tell me then?”

“Not much. I will let you know, however, that your prince gave up on his goal.”

“Then he made it to Kezare,” Khriss decided.

“I didn’t say that,” Loaten said, raising a finger.

“Yes, but I know the prince,” Khriss informed. “He wouldn’t have given up hope until he saw for himself that the sand mages weren’t real. Besides, you must have met him. You called him Gevin.”

Loaten frowned. “And?”

“His name is Prince Gevalden. Gevin is what he tells people to call him, but only in an informal setting, like in a comfortable room, sitting before a fireplace.”

Loaten smiled. “And I thought you were supposed to be bad at this, dear Duchess.”

“Who told you that?” Khriss asked with indignation.

“My dear,” Loaten reminded, “I was Scythe’s chief minister of diplomacy—you’d be surprised the things I had to know. Including prince’s nicknames. But, in this case you happen to be right. Gevin did make it to Kezare, and I have spoken with him, after a fashion. But that was a long time ago.”

“And where is he now?”

“I told you, dear Duchess, I’m not quite certain.”

Khriss sighed, leaning back in her chair.

“Do not be so despondent, my dear,” Loaten chided. “I am not a heartless man—seeing that you are relatively inexperienced with dayside, I will assign one of my best people to aid you.”

Khriss perked up. “Who?”

Loaten drank the last of his tea, then gestured to the young girl crouching on the chair watching the fires with curious eyes. As soon as Loaten pointed at her, however, the girl’s head snapped back to

the conversation. “Me?” she asked. “No. Not have time. Is too—”

“Oh, N’Teese,” Loaten said with an intolerant sigh, “must you use that accent? It’s incredibly harsh on an old man’s ears.”

N’Teese clenched her teeth, shooting Loaten a harsh look. “I’m not going to lead these fools all around the city, Loaten. I’m too busy.”

Khriss’s eyes opened wide with shock. When she had spoken the second time, the little girl’s horrible dayside accent had disappeared completely, to be replaced by a perfect Iiarian accent to match Loaten’s.

“You’re a Darksider?” Khriss asked incredulously.

Loaten chuckled. “We’re not sure what N’Teese is. She claims to be half-darksider, half-Kershtian, and half-Lossandin, though she obviously never claims to be good at mathematics. I personally don’t think she has any darkside blood in her at all.”

N’Teese stuck out her tongue at the fat darksider, then intentionally turned away from him to stare back into the fire, still crouching rather than sitting.

“Whatever N’Teese’s lineage, duchess,” Loaten continued, “she is an absolute marvel with languages—though she usually uses her gift to con her way into places, or money pouches, she has no right to be in. The amount you paid her today is enough to hire a professional guide’s services for a week. I’ve told her that she may cheat the daysiders all she wishes, but darksiders—especially newcomers—are under my protection.”

N’Teese sighed. “You’re bad for business, Loaten.”

“Perhaps,” Khriss added, “but so is deciding to abandon a person who has already shown she is willing to pay for your services. Who knows, maybe you’ll be rewarded.”

N’Teese’s eyes thinned, but she did smile slightly in contemplation.

Loaten chuckled. “Yes, duchess, my sources were certainly… inaccurate concerning you. Of course, I knew that much the moment you announced you were organizing an expedition to dayside. I understand you caused quite a commotion back in the Elisian court with that little declaration.”

Khriss smiled. “It was… unexpected,” she admitted.

Loaten rubbed one of his chins in thought. “What could cause a

politically inactive, socially reclusive scholar of a noblewoman to cross the border oceans with minimal protection and almost no knowledge of dayside? It's hard enough for those of us who know about the smuggling ships."

Khriss felt herself begin to blush. "Surely your sources can explain my motivations, My Lord," she said.

"Actually, it appears they were wrong again," Loaten said cryptically. However, before Khriss could question further, the sound of a door opening came from behind.

When she turned she saw a man with a revolting mass of flesh where his face should have been. One eye was completely lost in scar tissue, and the other was bulging and red. He walked with a limp, and wore one of the medallions on his head that Kenton said identified him as a member of the Kershtian merchant class. It was difficult to tell his skin color because of the scar tissue, but it looked Kershtian.

"Who is the woman?" the man croaked with a harsh voice that was almost a whisper.

"A visitor from darkside, Nilto," Loaten said. "A rather important person. A ruler, on her side of the world."

Nilto snorted. "Get rid of her," he ordered.

"You'll forgive Nilto's lack of tact, dear Duchess," Loaten apologized. "He is a rather impatient man, though many people suffer him. Probably because he is a Taisha."

"Taisha?" Khriss asked. She had heard Kenton use the word.

"The Taishin are the rulers of Lossand, my dear," Loaten explained. "There is one at the head of each Profession, and it is their council that governs the country."

"Him?" Khriss asked incredulously.

"Beauty isn't required for the job," Nilto croaked, flopping down in a chair. He eyed her for a long moment with a look Khriss couldn't read—and didn't want to, considering how revolting his twisted face was.

"Well?" Nilto demanded. "Get rid of her."

"I'm afraid the Lord Beggar is a difficult man to refuse, dear Duchess," Loaten apologized. "But, I believe our conversation was at an end anyway, wasn't it?"

"It was, and I thank you," Khriss said, rising and curtseying to

Loaten—intentionally ignoring this Lord Beggar. “N’Teese, are you coming?”

The little girl sighed, but climbed off her chair to scamper out of the room. Khriss followed more gracefully. As the door opened, she saw Baon and the others waiting outside. Baon, however, didn’t see her—he was focused on Loaten’s bloated form.

“Is that who I think it is?” he asked with a harsh sound in his voice.

Khriss frowned as she approached. “Loaten?” she asked. “He—”

She stopped as Baon cursed, his hand reaching for the pistol at his belt.

“Baon!” Khriss cried.

The mercenary froze, as did the two men in the room. The soldiers guarding the door, however, immediately reached for their swords.

Baon slowly let his hand slip from the pistol holster. Khriss sighed in relief, looking back into the room. Loaten had seen Baon as well, and the old Dynastic official’s eyes were wide—but not with fear. They looked more… confused than anything else.

“That man is a traitor,” Baon hissed.

“I know,” Khriss said. She had never seen Baon so emotional before.

“Let’s go,” the mercenary finally decided. “Before I decide to kill him.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Cynder agreed.

Khriss passed through the doorway, and Loaten’s guards relaxed, falling back into their regular stances. But, something was wrong with the way they had been standing. Almost as if they hadn’t been reaching for their swords at all—but something else.

Before, Khriss would have let the discrepancy drop. Baon’s training, however, urged her to look closer. As she did she could see a distinctive, though well hidden, knob of pistol hilts hidden in holsters underneath the men’s coats.

So they do have guns, Khriss realized. *Or, at least, Loaten’s men do. They keep them hidden, though—they don’t want the rest of the darksiders to know about them.*

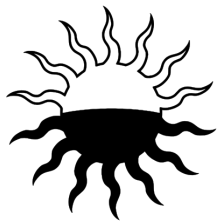
Baon caught her eye and nodded, and they began to move away from Loaten’s room. As they did, however, Khriss heard Loaten

asking Nilto a question while the door closed.

“So?” the darksider asked. “Has the Diem been dissolved?”

“Actually, no,” Nilto replied. “Something very interesting happened…”

– 10 –



Kenton's appearance had an immediate effect on the crowd outside the Hall. He hadn't changed into traditional sand master robes—he was still wearing a simple Kershtian tan—his ribbons, however, were enough to declare what he was. Even still, there were enough sand masters in the crowd that simple mastered sand wouldn't have been too surprising. The golden sash, however, was a different matter.

The stunned bodies were lethargic to move, and Kenton had to slow his step to keep from arriving at the crowd too quickly. Eventually, however, the people realized who he was and where he was going. They parted before him, watching in silence. Then one voice, exclaiming in surprise, started as a catalyst to the rest, and sound returned in a massive wave.

"What are you doing?"

"Kenton? You're alive?"

"I thought the mastrells were dead!"

Years as the Diem's favored topic of rumors had prepared Kenton to be the center of attention, and he ignored the people as he climbed the steps to the black-stone Hall of Judgement, Dirin trailing somewhat less confidently in his wake. Two trackts, dressed in formal black Hall uniforms, crossed their spears before him, blocking his path to the doors.

“The Council is in session,” said one of them—a broad-faced Lossandin man. “The Hall is closed.”

Kenton paused, letting his three ribbons of sand continue to twist and spin in the air around him. He was amazed at how little thought it took to keep them moving in their simple pattern.

“Not to a mastrell,” Kenton informed.

“There aren’t any mastrells left,” the guard replied.

“You’re certain of that?” Kenton asked, allowing one of his glowing ribbons to flip at his sash.

The guard paused, shooting a look at his companion. Then he sighed, pulling his spear back.

Kenton stood, half-stunned by the exchange. He had been expecting to argue his way into the Hall—all his life, he had needed belligerence and stubbornness to gain even the slightest concession. Yet, two simple statements had won this conversation. Perhaps there was something to be said for authority after all.

Still a little unsure at his victory, Kenton reached forward and pushed open the sub-door in the massive gate, stepping inside. He held it for Dirin, the allowed it to slam closed.

His eyes immediately began to adjust to the darker interior, and he let his sands fall stale to the ground—it would be inappropriate to keep them going within the Hall.

Like all dayside buildings, the Hall had been constructed with numerous openings in its pyramidal walls to provide light. Kenton stood in the antechamber. Directly before him was another set of doors, these ones open, with another pair of trackts guarding them. Beyond those doors was the Judgement room, which took up the bulk of the Hall’s space. Inside that room he would find the Taishin, leaders of the eight Professions—well, seven since there was no Lord Mastrell.

“Come on,” he said to Dirin. “I’ve done this before.” Each year, when Praxton had refused to grant Kenton mastrellship, Kenton had appealed the decision to the Council. He was very familiar with the Taishin and their ways.

Dirin nodded quietly, staring up in wonder at the insides of the Hall. The buildings, sources of law and justice in Lossand, were regarded with nearly as much reverence as Kershtian temples.

“This place is huge,” Dirin whispered back.

Kenton shrugged. “About as big as it looks on the outside.”

Kenton strode forward, trying to gather his optimism. Just because he was familiar with the process didn’t mean that he would be successful—in fact, he was probably going to have a difficult time convincing the Taishin to listen to him. All four times he had appealed to the Council they had denied him with seven-one decisions. He suspected that after four years of useless appeals—made only to spite Praxton—the Taishin were growing tired of him.

The two trackts at the door didn’t attempt to stop him—if he had come through the gates, then he was valid. They stood quietly as Kenton walked through the open doors and entered the judgement chamber. Shaped like an inverted pyramid, the chamber had a central platform for testimonies, surrounded by three sloping walls filled with seats. Nearly every chair had a body in it—Hall seats, especially in Kezare, were expensive commodities. It was more than the privilege of watching judgements—a seat in the Hall was a sign of prestige and importance, even if they were purely spectatorial in nature. *Kelzin*, influential Profession members, and public officials vied for the places ferociously.

Of course, the only people in the room who really mattered were the Taishin. Eight raised chairs stood on the far wall directly in front of the testimony platform. Seven were filled, one was empty. Kenton’s eyes sought a place on the second wall, about midway up, where the mastrells usually sat. The chairs sat empty, like an open sore in the otherwise packed wall of people.

Taking a deep breath, Kenton approached the proceedings judge on the side of the corridor. Kenton stood in the open-topped tunnel that sloped up to the testimony platform. He could make out a familiar form standing on the platform—the man’s ugliness could be recognized even from a great distance. Nilto, so called Lord Beggar, leader of the unofficial ninth Profession. What reason would he have to make testimony during proceedings held to ratify a new Lord Mastrell?

Nilto had obviously finished his arguments, for he was stepping off the platform to return to his seat.

“Who gives the next testimony?” Kenton asked the proceedings judge, a squat old man who sat at a desk at the side of the corridor. The man looked down at his open book of proceedings, where he

had been making notes of what each speaker said.

"No one," the judge said. "Nilto was the final speaker. The judgement should be coming soon, now."

"It cannot—I have testimony to add to these proceedings."

The judge looked up with surprise, looking Kenton over for the first time. "A… Mastrell?" the man said skeptically.

"That is right," Kenton informed. "Mastrell Kenton. I was advanced during the ceremonies a few weeks before. By Law, I am entitled to speak on this matter."

The judge raised his eyebrows, but shrugged slightly, scribbling Kenton's name at the bottom of the list. Then he spoke a few words to the courier dressed in Hall black beside him.

"The man will announce you, My Lord," the judge informed. "Be warned, however, the Council may find this… irregular."

Kenton smiled. "I suspect they will." Then he nodded to Dirin, who smiled encouragingly, even though he was looking more and more overwhelmed the further they got into the Hall.

"May the Sands guide, Kenton," Dirin offered.

Up above, the courier announced Mastrell Kenton. Kenton heard his name reverberate through the chamber, the unfamiliar title of 'mastrell' sounding quite odd to him. As the courier finished, Kenton strode up the slope and onto the platform, wishing he had taken the time to change into formal robes.

Kenton would try for the rest of his life to find an experience that matched that first look around the judgement chambers. Three walls of shocked faces stared at him, their confusion almost a palatable thing. It was as if the Sand Lord himself had decided to appear to them.

"Ah, our dear Kenton of the Diem," a sudden voice said, as if completely oblivious to the surprised tension in the rest of the room, "back to bother the Council again. I always knew that something as paltry as death would never be enough to keep you from annoying us."

Kenton smiled. At the far end of the line of Taishin, in the least-respected and often-ignored Council seat, lounged a man in ridiculous violet robes with a frilly white shirt underneath. The cuffs of the shirt were undone, and were stained with droplets of wine. He was an older man, perhaps in his late forties. His face

could have been a respected face, it had strong features and almost a venerable quality. The face, however, betrayed the rosy cheeks and red nose of drunkenness. Delious, the Lord Admiral, the embarrassment of Lossand.

"I apologize for my tardiness, Lords and Lady Taishin," Kenton announced, smiling slightly at Delious' comment. He rested his hands on the front of the platform's podium, looking across at the six men and one woman who would decide the Diem's face. Hopefully, he wasn't too late.

"Kenton, this is most irregular," the woman in the direct center of the group announced.

Kenton smiled a her choice of words. Heelis, Lady Judge and Taisha of the Halls of Judgement, Profession for trackts, judges, and scribes, represented her Profession with exactness. Cool, calm, and decisive, the elderly Lady Judge—oldest of the Taishin by at least two decades—was the very embodiment of justice.

"I apologize again, Lady Judge," Kenton said. "I only ask that you hear me. As the Council has undoubtedly noticed, I come wearing a recent acquisition that may have bearing on your decision."

"I can see that, Kenton. I assume you wear it to make a claim, and not just a fashion statement?"

"Indeed, Lady Judge." Kenton smiled as Heelis inspected him. Despite her unquestioned impartiality, Kenton had always felt a kind of kinship to the Lady Judge. She knew what it was to fight authority—she was the first female Taisha in the history of Lossand. In fact, she was the first female member of the Hall in the history of Lossand. Very few of the Professions admitted women, and Lossand society was heavily influenced by Kershtian ideals. Heelis, however, had used the Law as her shield—for a neuter pronoun in Formal Kersha had been used in the Law's writing. After years of struggle, she had come to hold what was debatably the most powerful position in all of Lossand.

"This is ridiculous!" a new voice announced. Kenton looked down, cringing slightly. He hadn't seen Drile earlier—the slope of the entrance corridor had prevented it. The sand master sat in a low seat a short distance from the Council. He wore white robes, but no sash.

“Sand master Drile,” Heelis warned, “you are not in a position to address this Council. We have already heard your arguments this day.”

“My apologies, Lady Judge,” Drile said, forcing himself to be civil. “However, this is outrageous! This man makes mockery of the Law by taking for himself what must be given!”

“No more!” Heelis ordered, her voice firm despite her sixty-plus years. “If you wish to speak, add your name to the list. Until then, this Council requires your silence!”

Drile’s jaw snapped shut, and Kenton couldn’t keep himself from smiling. He winked at Drile’s hateful stare, then nodded to the side, where the proceedings judge was scribbling.

“Drile has a point, if not the right of address, Lady Judge,” a new voice—this one deep and hard—added. “This boy goes too far in his presumptions.”

The Lord General, Reegent, was a tall man with a rectangular face that was accented by a short, square beard. More than a warrior, Reegent was a politician and a statesman, the unofficial leader of Lossand’s wealthy landowners, the *kelzin*. He was not a man who dealt well with what he considered ‘nonsense.’

“Lord Reegent, Lady Judge, other members of the Council,” Kenton said before Reegent could continue. “Let be begin by assuring you that I do not take this sash unto myself. It was given to be by the Lord Mastrell, my father, in a legal advancement ceremony.”

“Lies!” Drile called from beside the proceedings booth, where he was ordering the judge to add his name in after Kenton’s.

Heelis shot Drile a harsh look, but then looked back at Kenton. “We had not heard of this, Kenton,” she said. “As far as we were told, the Lord Mastrell died in the middle of the ceremony. Are you implying he was going to advance you, and only didn’t because he was killed?”

“No, Lady Judge,” Kenton continued. “I imply nothing—it is as I said. The Lord Mastrell gave me this sash, and declared me a mastrell. It was the very last thing he did before the Kershtian arrow took him.”

“The other sand masters said nothing of this!” Reegent snapped, folding his arms and frowning at Kenton. There was no hatred in his

eyes, only intolerance. Reegent liked things quick and simple—the last-minute addition of a testimony did not fit with his neat view of how a judgement should proceed.

"The other sand masters didn't know about it, Lord Reegent," Kenton said. "They didn't hear the Lord Mastrell advance me—those who survived the attack were standing too far back to hear much of anything. If you bring them in for testimony, they won't be able to say either way on this matter."

"I can't believe we're even listening to this," Vey, the Lord Merchant, snapped. Short and very Kershtian, Vey would hate Kenton for religious reasons no matter what proof he brought or arguments he made.

"Who's listening?" Delious mumbled from his end of the table, taking a long drink from his cup.

"I agree with the Lord Merchant," Gennel, the Lord Farmer, said.

"There's a surprise," Delious noted, pouring himself another drink. The Lord Farmer tended to agree with whatever Vey said. Gennel was not only the council's other Kershtian, but he also belonged to the same *DaiKeen* as Vey. The younger man would do whatever his elder commanded.

"My Lords and Lady," Kenton said, breaking back into the conversation. His first appeal, four years ago, had been poorly prepared and pathetically executed. Since that time, he had spent a great deal of time teaching himself to do better. He'd needed some way to spend his time—all of his lessons in the Diem had been repetitious the first year around, let alone the eighth.

"I understand this is difficult to believe," he continued, "but I do have a witness who can prove my point."

"Who?" the Lord General demanded.

"Undermastrell Elorin," Kenton explained. "He was near the front of the proceedings, and would have been able to hear Lord Praxton give me the mastrellship. Unfortunately, Elorin was left powerless from overmastery, and has since disappeared."

"Not much of a witness," Vey said with a snort.

"Agreed," Heelis said. "A man who can give no testimony is not a witness, young Kenton."

"Yes, but is not the possibility of my true-spoken words enough for you to hear my plea? All I ask is justice be done."

“Justice?” Reegent asked. “What right do you have to demand justice? You, who have used this Council as your personal tool of defiance. Your history of insubordination is well known, Kenton. You spite all that governs and creates order, and now you want us to give you the authority to rule over others?”

“I have said nothing of requesting authority, Lord General,” Kenton said.

“Are you saying your purpose here is not to name yourself as Lord Mastrell?” Heelis asked pointedly.

“No, Lady Judge,” Kenton said truthfully. “I will admit that such could very well be a side-effect of what I have to say. However, I will be honest with you when I say I do not seek to be Lord Mastrell. In all frankness, I’d make a horrible Lord Mastrell. What Lord Reegent said about me is true—I have little patience for authority.”

“Then what do you want, young Kenton?”

“I come only to plead on the Diem’s behalf. Do not make Drile the Lord Mastrell. It doesn’t matter who else you choose—acolent or fen. Just don’t choose Drile. The man is a tyrant and a criminal. The Diem would suffer beneath his rule.”

Heelis smiled slightly. “Young Kenton, we weren’t going to make him Lord Mastrell.”

Kenton froze, blinking in surprise. “Excuse me, Lady Judge?” he asked.

“Perhaps you should check to see what trial you’re attending before you stick your face into it, *Ry’Kensha*,” Vey said with a snicker.

“These proceedings are not to ratify a new Lord Mastrell,” Heelis continued. “Though that may be what everyone assumes. The Council’s purpose is not to choose who will lead the Diem in the future, but to determined if there is even going to be a Diem in the future.”

“What?” Kenton asked with shock. “You would… disband the Diem?”

“Yes,” Heelis said simply.

“But, you can’t destroy one of the Professions,” Kenton said with confusion. “What good would that do?”

“Whining will get you nowhere, *Ry’Kensha*,” Vey snapped.

“This Council may do as we please. There are provisions for it in the Law.”

“Did someone say wine?” Delious interrupted, looking up from the place where he had been resting his head on the table. Everyone ignored him.

“The Lord Merchant is correct, young Kenton,” Heelis said. “The Law says that if a Profession is left without leadership, irrevocably decayed or destroyed, that it can be removed—assuming that the function it provides is not vital.”

“But, the sand masters are vital,” Kenton said. He knew the statement was weak, but he was trying to keep them talking while he reoriented himself. Dissolve the Diem? He had come intending to denounce Drile, not try and save an entire Profession.

“Vital?” Reegent asked. “Boy, you sand masters are the most redundant, overpaid group on the sands. What do you do? You sit in your castle and look down at the rest of Lossand, sucking away its resources and giving nothing in return.”

“We offer protection from the Kershtians,” Kenton rebutted.

“We haven’t been at war with the Kershtians for centuries,” the Lord General said. “Not since the merchants took the power from the priests. Besides, can you really claim you could protect us? How well did you do in protecting yourselves?”

He has a point, Kenton admitted to himself.

“The fact is, young Kenton,” Heelis said softly, “that the other Professions are tired of supporting the Diem. You cost nearly as much in the people’s taxes as the Tower’s soldiers, yet you give nothing in return. The Mastrells are allowed to take anything they want from a merchant without offering recompense; they presume to rule over Lossand, always careful to maintain an air of mysticism and control. Sand masters are almost more famous for their arrogance than their powers.”

“And now you do something?” Kenton demanded. “You strike when the Diem is weak and cannot defend itself? Why not speak out earlier, try to change the Diem before its arrogance led to its destruction?”

Surprisingly, Kenton actually managed to create a tiny flash of guilt in Heelis’s even-tempered eyes. “Perhaps we should have,” she admitted. “But that time is gone now, and this is our chance to act.”

“And what will the sand masters do?” Kenton shot back. “Dissolving the Diem will not get rid of us.”

“We were going to decide that during the next Council,” Heelis explained.

“Personally, I think exile is the best choice,” Vey announced, a thin smile on his lips.

Kenton snorted. “What would you do, Lord Vey? Create a state where sand masters are hunted like sandlings? Turn this nation into a place of fear and prejudice?”

“Sand mastery must be taught, young Kenton,” Heelis reminded. “I have studied your ways—I know how new sand masters are made. It is not spontaneous; it takes you weeks to even decide if a person has ability or not. Sand masters never just appear in the population.”

“So you would exterminate the power entirely?” Kenton asked, suddenly feeling chilled. Heelis knew a lot—probably more than she should. It would be possible, if they made an effort, to get rid of sand mastery completely.

“If a skill gives this people no benefit, then is it worth the trouble of its upkeep?” Heelis asked quietly.

“To say nothing of its danger,” Reegent added.

That’s what it is, Kenton realized, nodding silently to himself in understanding. *They claim its the money, they say its our arrogance, but in the end its our power. Power they can’t control. The sand masters could have taken over Lossand at any time, and they all know it.*

“My Lords and Lady, you make many accusations.” Kenton said, searching for anything that would help him. He had memorized large chunks of the Law in his attempts to foil his father, but most of what he had studied dealt directly with the Diem. He hadn’t the background for an argument with more general application.

“I won’t say that your claims are not true,” Kenton continued. “I fact, I will back many of them. As Lord Reegent pointed out, I have spent much of my life fighting against the Diem’s leadership. I know well their arrogance and selfishness. But, the Law was not created for the purpose of destruction. It exists to help Lossand. Should we throw away a tool simply because it has been misused in the past? The Law says ‘Let the Professions serve in their proscribed duties,

for the benefit of the people and the nation as a whole.'

"Well, that is what I ask of you. Let the sand masters serve. Now, when we are weakened, is the time to change us for the better, not the time to bury us in the sands. For who knows the day when you might need to dig us back out, only to find that we've were lost to the *kerla*'s winds long ago?"

"You argue well, young Kenton," Heelis acknowledged, her aged eyes searching Kenton's face. "But, I fear your words come too late. We have waited for centuries as the sand masters grew in power and dominance. This tool is not just one that hasn't been used, but one that has been broken and warped to the point that its original potential has been lost. Perhaps it is better that we cast it to the sands so we can become accustomed to working without it. But, I speak only for myself, not this entire Council. I believe, unless one of the other Taisha has something to add, that it is time for vote."

Heelis checked the faces of the other Taishin, who, except for Delious, who appeared to be asleep, nodded. She looked to the proceedings judge, who shook his head—Drile must have removed his name when he realized that Kenton's arguments weren't going to do any good.

"Then we vote. Lord General?"

"I vote to dissolve," Reegent announced firmly.

"Lord Merchant?"

"I as well, Lady Judge," Vey said, trying to look distinguished despite the fact that he sat at least a foot shorter than everyone else at the table.

"Lord Farmer?"

"Dissolve," Gennel announced.

"Lord Mason?"

The red-headed emissary of Selcomb, Lord Mason—head of Lossand's diggers and miners—nodded. "In behalf of my Lord Selcomb, I also vote against, Lady Heelis."

"Lord Artisan?"

Rite, spokesman for Lossand's craftsmen, nodded his solemn head. "It is for the best, I believe. Dissolve."

"And Lord Admiral."

Rite nudged Delious, who looked up disorientedly. "What's that? Time to vote? What did Vey say?"

“The Lord Merchant voted to dissolve the Diem,” Heelis said, her voice barely tolerant.

“Well, I vote the opposite then,” Delious said with a yawn, smiling at the Kershtian Lord Merchant, who scowled back. In all four of Kenton’s appeals, only Delious had voted for him—and each time he only did so because Vey had voted against Kenton.

“And I vote to dissolve as well,” Heelis said. “I am afraid, Kenton, that even if we made you Lord Mastrell, your reign would be brief. This Council has decided that henceforth there will be only seven Professions in Lossand. The Diem is to be dissolved. We will decide what to do with you in our next Council meeting tomorrow.”

“Forbid them to practice their unholy art,” Vey encouraged, looking at Kenton with loathing eyes.

“That will be decided on the morrow,” Heelis informed.

Kenton felt his hand slide from the podium, stunned. Yet, at the same time, part of him was not surprised. He had come in to this argument half-expecting to fail. The last four times he had stood on the testimony platform, he had received similar responses. All his struggles had conditioned him to accept the fact that victories were rare. Very rare.

He turned, stepping down from the podium as conversations erupted around the room. No more Diem. He had failed.

And, for some reason, this failure felt different than the ones before. Kenton frowned, not quite able to understand the pained despair in his chest, the sickness, the feeling of utter frustration. He was used to failure—it had been a long time since he had let losing an argument bother him. Why was he so hurt this time?

And slowly, as he thought about it, he came to understand. Every time before, his losses had only affected him. He had been fighting for himself, and he hadn’t really feared losing. He had been fighting just to fight—the outcome was immaterial. No one had been counting on him.

He looked up, seeking out Dirin, who sat slumped beside a wall a short distance away. The young boy’s head was bowed, and Kenton could see him shaking from the sobs. How would the rest of the Diem feel, those whose entire lives had been spent learning sand mastery and serving in their places? They too were victims of the mastrells, but they were to be cast aside like a shattered

weapon.

That sickness you feel, the pain, he said to himself, for some reason forming the words with his father's voice. *That is responsibility. That is what you fought to receive all this time—it was the unnoticed reward of your struggle.*

The members of the Diem had been counting on Kenton, even if they didn't know it. He had been representing them; it had been his duty to save them. This time, his arguments hadn't just been for himself. This time, the decision actually mattered. And he had failed.

"No!" Kenton yelled. He turned, stepping back up onto the podium and slammed his fist against its carapace. The front of the room began to quiet around him, people who had been standing to leave instead turning to look at the source of the sudden noise.

"Kenton, step down," Heelis counseled. Half of the Taishin were already out of their seats.

"No!" Kenton repeated. "I demand this proceedings be declared void."

"On what grounds?" Heelis snapped.

"On the grounds that I wasn't informed that it would occur," Kenton informed firmly. Passages of Law seemed to flood into his mind, forming connections and conclusions almost without effort. For the first time in his life, he had a purpose to go with his arguments.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Vey said with a snort.

Kenton looked Vey directly in the eyes. "By the Law, as expressly stated in the Diem's Charter, section the fourth, as soon as a Lord Mastrell dies from either natural or external causes, the mastrell who has served in his position for the greatest number of years becomes the acting head of the Diem. If he is unable to serve in this capacity, the title passes to the next senior mastrell and so forth. It is the acting head of the Diem's duty to mediate the council of mastrells, who will choose the next Lord Mastrell, a choice that is then formally ratified by the Council of Taishin."

"Yes," Heelis said. "And so?"

"And," Kenton said, punctuating the word with a snap of his voice. He spoke with determination, his voice authoritative, "in the general Law Charter, section the fifteenth, subsection the first, the

laws for governing the removal of a Taisha, either formal or acting, from his place are set forth. He must be given two weeks notice to prepare for the Council meeting that will remove his title for any reason.

"At the deaths of the other mastrells, I immediately became acting head of the Diem. This Council this day, in attempting to dissolve the Diem, has by tangential effect removed me from my place. That cannot have happened unless you gave me warning of this meeting two weeks before this day."

"But the Diem hadn't even been attacked two weeks ago!" Reegent protested.

"The Law is explicit," Kenton said.

Reegent snorted. "I thought you didn't want to be Lord Mastrell."

"That is *not* what this is about, Lord General," Kenton shot back.

"Heelis," Reegent said, "tell this boy he is a fool, and let us be going."

The Lady Judge, however, had slowly settled herself back into her chair, her face deep in thought, a slight frown on her lips.

"Heelis?" Reegent asked again.

"He is right," she finally whispered.

"What!" Reegent demanded.

"This judgement is void, Lord General," Heelis informed. "The boy is right—the Law is very specific. No Taisha can be removed unless there is at least two-weeks warning given. Actually, the announcement is supposed to be made to the entire Profession, not just its leader. We acted too hastily."

The other Taishin had stopped, and the room had now fallen nearly silent.

"As Lady Judge," Heelis said in a firm, if resentful, voice, "I must declare the proceedings of this Council void. The Diem is not to be dissolved."

Vey hissed in surprised, but Reegent only shook his head in anger. Kenton, however, felt as if a massive weight had slipped free from his back.

"But," Heelis continued sharply, "I am hereby formally giving you notice, Kenton. In two weeks this Council will meet again, and there we will decide whether or not to dissolve the Diem. I suspect

the votes will not magically change during the wait."

"You give me notice," Kenton said in response. "Does that mean this council accepts and ratifies me as Lord Mastrell?"

Heelis paused.

"There is only one mastrell left, my Lords and Lady," Kenton said. "If you don't ratify me, then you will have to ratify someone. You have to make the formal announcement of the trial directly to the Lord Mastrell."

Heelis caught the eyes of the other Council members, who shrugged.

"No," Heelis finally decided. "You are not Lord Mastrell—but you are acting Lord Mastrell. I can deliver the announcement to you anyway."

"What difference does it make?" Kenton asked.

"You are the one who is so strict about the Law, young Kenton," Heelis informed. "Well, the Law says that the Council cannot ratify a new Taisha until it is satisfied that the person has actually been chosen. Since your mastrellship is still in doubt, we cannot ratify you. That also means that you do not get a vote on this Council."

"All right," Kenton said slowly.

"In addition," Heelis continued, "under the Law I am going to consider the votes of this Council today the decision of a preliminary hearing."

Kenton frowned. She was getting into the parts of the Law he hadn't studied. He was no lawyer, even though he had done some research.

"In case you don't know what that means," Heelis continued, sensing his confusion, "a preliminary hearing is one held before a preset date—such as the two week rule you spoke of. Its decisions are binding unless its members decide unanimously to throw it out."

"Unanimously?" Kenton asked.

"That is right, acting Lord Mastrell," Heelis said, standing and taking Reegent's offered arm. "In two weeks this Council will meet again. And, unless you can convince every member of its body to vote in favor of the Diem, your Profession will be dissolved. Good day."

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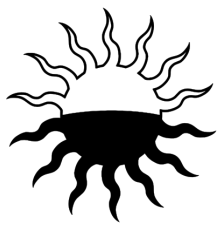

Ais stood beneath the sun's divine power, feeling its heat surround him. His formal trackt's uniform amplified the warmth, its black colors sucking in heat and holding it close. Many new trackts complained about the dark color, though they soon became accustomed to it. Ais had never complained. Black was the color of justice—it was straightforward, unmistakable, and impossible to adulterate by adding other colors. In addition, the color was avoided by most other people, and so trackts always stood out in a crowd. When there was danger or a problem, people knew that they would find aid where they saw the distinctive blackness of a trackt uniform.

Ais moved through such a crowd now. He was walking through Portside, the largest and most hectic of Kezare's marketplaces. However, despite the press of people, Ais had no trouble moving. People gave trackts a wide berth. As was often the case, the source of justice in Lossand's society was also somewhat feared by its people. Everyone had their tiny secrets they irrationally feared the trackts would expose. They should have known better. Ais had much larger prey to deal with.

Secrets, Ais thought to himself. *We all have secrets. Even trackts.*

He pushed such thoughts from his mind, continuing forward,

moving with the distinctive formal posture and emotionless face that had made him one of Kezare's most recognizable trackts. Of course, his heritage had a lot to do with that as well. Even as he passed through he crowd, Ais caught glimpses of his Kershtian brothers eyeing him with looks of distaste, and even hate. Lossand had a large Kershtian population—some of whom had been living away from the *kerla* for a half-dozen generations. Kershtians were Kershtians, however, and they owed their first allegiance to their *DaiKeen*. It was an unwritten law that no Kershtian would serve Lossand's heathen government by joining the Hall's trackts, the Tower's soldiers, or, of course, the Diem's sand masters.

Ais didn't return the harsh looks—he simply continued to march through the crowd, ignoring the dark Kershtian faces. He had grown accustomed to the resentment long ago. Yet, almost unconsciously, he felt the warm metal of his *DaiKeen* symbol slapping against his forehead—like many Lossandin Kershtians, Ais chose to wear one of the medallions instead of tattooing or scaring his skin. He claimed the affiliation of *DaiKeenKar*, what Lossandin people would call the priest's *DaiKeen*. Such allegiance made his choice of Professions seem all that much more odd—at least, to others. To Ais it made perfect sense.

Justice belonged to the Sand Lord. Right and wrong were decided by His divine judgement. Ais served that justice—it was his passion. He brought order to the chaos around him. Since he lived in Lossand, the only way to maintain order was to join the trackts, so that was what Ais had done. He saw no hypocrisy in serving Lossand Law, as long as that Law was fair to both Lossandin and Kershtian.

Besides, there were other reasons for joining the Hall. Other reasons for seeking the justice, the order, and the stability it brought…

Ais caught sight of two trackts approaching from a short distance away, their black uniforms doing their job. The approaching men were Lossandin, of course, and they wore clothing identical to Ais's own. The trackt uniform was constructed of a single piece of black cloth. Its long sleeves reached all the way to the wrists, and ended in stiff cuffs. The top half of the uniform pulled tight across the chest and waist, fastened by silver buckles.

From the waist down, the uniform became a loose robe-like skirt, however, providing freedom of movement in battle. On the head was a simple, straight-topped cap and, like Ais, the approaching men were armed with a sword at his waist and a polished *zinkall* on his left forearm. The only thing that these men lacked was black cape like the one Ais wore—the sign that Ais was a senior trackt, leader of his own band.

The men, Ais's Second and Third in command, saluted as they approached. Jedan had served in Ais's personal band of trackts for over three years now, and had proven himself a competent and effective subordinate. The other man, Tain, was a little newer to the band—two years. He was a pleasant man, and one Ais had been grooming for leadership for some time. He would make a fine Senior Trackt.

"What is happening in the Hall?" Ais asked.

"They're hearing testimony about the Diem, sir," Jedan explained, falling into step beside Ais

"Perfect," Ais said, careful to keep any hint of emotion out of his voice. Nilto would be there, listening to the testimonies, like always. Now was the time to act. "Tain, you're with me. Jedan, take command of the second squad."

"Yes, sir." Jedan split off, moving down a side-street as Ais continued forward.

Of course, it would have been better to catch Nilto—the so called Lord Beggar—in the raid that was about to take place. The Lord Beggar, or Lord Thief as Ais liked to think of him, was too clever for to be caught so easily, however. Ais had tried for years to implicate the man as leader of Kezare's criminal underground, but so far had found little success. Nilto covered his tracks well. In all of his illegal dealings, he was known as Sharezan. Yet, in all his years of investigation, Ais had never found a person who could describe what Sharezan was supposed to look like. No one had seen him—he was a non-existent cover.

Up ahead Ais could see the object of the day's raid approaching—a tall, run-down market building that appeared little different from those surrounding it. Months of investigation, however, had told him that the building's top floor hid a meeting-place far different from the building's ordinary appearance. Ais had long ago

given up trying to get directly at Sharezan. Instead, he worked indirectly, toppling what thieves and bandits he could, trying to inch closer and closer to their leader. The process had worked—he was getting closer to Sharezan himself. Soon Ais would catch someone high enough in the organization to implicate Nilto.

Today was a perfect opportunity. Ais had been following the movements of a Kershtian named Lokmlen, one of Shaerezan's chief assassins. Over the last six months, Lokmlen had murdered three trackts. Fortunately, he had been spotted completing the last of the killings, and had been forced to go into hiding. If Ais's sources were right, then the nondescript building just above was also Lokmlen's safehouse.

Ais felt anticipation welling inside him as he and Tain left the main street, then ducked into a shop out of the safehouse's line of sight. Inside the shop waited ten trackts, all members of Ais's personal band. A short distance away, Jedan's team—dressed in plain clothes—would be working their way up the building beside the safe house. They would take out the watchmen on the safehouse roof while Ais's team attacked from below. Hopefully, the look-out's gone, Ais would be able to get to the third floor before Lokmlen even knew he was in the building.

It had taken months to find Lokmlen, then weeks to plan a proper raid. But, the couldn't have a more perfect opportunity than this day. Nilto was giving testimony at the Hall—which meant his organization was temporarily left without leadership. If Ais struck quickly, then Lokmlen would be in his custody before Nilto even finished his speech.

"I'm telling you, it's empty," Merris urged. "All of the Diem's riches are completely unguarded, left to be plundered. And, the best part is, we know no one's going to come looking for them. They're all dead!"

"I don't know," Reen said playing absently with the stone coin in his hand. "They aren't all dead."

"Enough of them are," Merris shot back. He eyed the other two men at the table, neither of which had much to say. Namot's Kershtian face had grown pale at the mere mention of sand masters, and he was now mumbling something in his people's incomprehensible language. Tarn was trying his best to ignore the

conversation—he was just mad that the card game had stopped. Of course, Tarn had always been more soft than courageous; he would rather gamble for months, barely cheating enough people to get by, than take one chance that would set him for life.

Reen flipped his coin into the air and caught it again—it was an heirloom of sorts, the first coin he had ever stolen some fifteen years before. Merris found the flipping annoying—he always had. Unfortunately, he knew he couldn't do this job alone. The Diem didn't have stairs, and all the valuables were on the second or third floors. Merris would need man-power to make a decent run of it in one attempt.

Theirs wasn't the only such conversation happening in the room. The room was a favored meeting-place, and was filled with tables, plush chairs, and cushions on the floor. The room was well-lighted by the windows—even thieves on dayside shunned darkness—but was on the building's third floor, which offered a measure of protection against being seen. At least a half-dozen conversations just like Merris's were happening around the room—each of them potentially discussing the same plan. That was why he needed to move quickly.

"Look," Merris cajoled. "I know it sounds dangerous, but are we going to let a few sandies—dead sandies—keep us from the haul of a lifetime? I'm telling you, we don't have long. As soon as people realize that the mastrells really aren't coming back, the Diem is going to be crawling with job-men."

"What about the ones that are still alive?" Reen said, flipping the coin again.

"Most of them aren't even powerful enough to get to the upper floors—they'll never know we're there. Besides, I have it on good authority that after today, we won't have much to worry about."

"What do you mean?" Reen asked carefully.

Merris smiled. Reen was interested. "Let's just say that the Diem as a Profession is about to go the way of its mastrells."

Reen thought for a moment, rotating the coin across his knuckles. "All right, I'm in," he decided, sending the coin into the air with a particularly strong flip.

As soon as the coin left his fingers, the room plunged into blackness.

Cries of startlement sounded through the room—startlement that quickly turned to panic. Merris felt it himself—terror from the lightless void surrounding him. His yell of fright joined the others as he stumbled away from the table, tripping on his chair, disoriented and confused.

Then, the darkness parted slightly. A door opened on the far side of the room, light from the hallway outside spilling into the room. However, Merris's horror didn't go away. Silhouetted in the doorway stood a form distinctified by its flowing bottom and wide cape. Merris reached for his sword as *zinkallin* began to fire.

The coin fell forgotten, cracking against the table.

Ais strode through the room, sword in one hand, *zinkall* raised to fire. Few of the thieves offered resistance, however. They were too confused by the sudden darkness and subsequent attack to do much but stumble around in confusion. The thick cloth window-coverings—rolled down by Jedan's men on the roof—were removed just after Ais's squad entered the room, and Jedan's squad began coming down ropes just outside. However, it appeared if such cautions were unnecessary.

"He isn't here," Tain noted, approaching Ais as the rest of the trackts gathered up the thieves.

Ais nodded. "No," he agreed, double-checking faces. Most of the thieves were nameless ruffians or unimportant thieves. Lokmlen was nowhere to be seen.

Jedan sighed, approaching from the other side. "Good experience for the men, I guess," he mumbled. Most of Jedan's squad was made up of younger trackts, recent additions to Ais's band.

Ais didn't acknowledge the comment. He stood, arms folded, as he watched the criminals being led from the room. The trackts probably wouldn't be able to hold most of them—they had no evidence. Ais ground his teeth in frustration—months of planning had been wasted. He was no closer to catching Nilto than he had been before. He had failed. He could almost hear the Lord Beggar laughing when he heard about Ais's mistake, his raid on a den of pickpockets and petty burglars. Laughing…

A sharp pain brought Ais back to the room. His hands were clenched to tightly that his fingernails were biting into the skin of

his palm, drawing blood. Ais quickly refocused, pushing back the anger and rage before it took him over. His breathing slowed, and his muscles relaxed. Deftly, he moved his fingers, pressing them against his palm to staunch the blood flow, then he looked around with concern. Had his lapse been noticed?

Jedan was supervising the removal of the last few thieves, and Tain was standing outside, speaking with a few other trackts. They hadn't seen him. They must never see him, must never know the rage that threatened their leader. Trackts had to be focused, bastions of order and control. Justice required such—there could be no chaos in the ranks of Lossand's civil protectors. If it were known that Ais, most famous of trackts, could not control his own emotions…

"Looks like we're done here, sir," Jedan said, saluting.

"Good," Ais said curtly, clasping his hands behind his back.

Jedan nodded, turning to the few remaining members of his squad in preparation to go. Ais frowned, watching his Second cross the room. Something was wrong. Ais followed Jedan, stepping off the distance from one wall to the other. The room was too small—it didn't match the careful plans Ais had drawn for the building. That meant…

He looked up just as several small sections of the far wall opened, revealing the ends of *zinkallin*.

"Trap!" Ais yelled. The call came too late as the sound of *zinkallin* air reports sounded through the room. A wave of arrows began to cut down both trackts and criminals. One missile took a surprised Jedan in the neck, dropping him soundlessly to the floor. Other trackts screamed in pain, falling with arrows sticking from their chests or limbs.

Ais dashed forward, heedless of the archers. He ignored the death, the threat on his own life, as he ran toward the wall. A dozen arrows snapped past him, the archers finding it difficult to aim for single targets in such an enclosed space. One arrow passed within inches of Ais's leg, tearing a hole in his cape as it hissed by. The trackts offered a pathetic resistance, many of them wounded or dead, the others unable to fire effectively against such a massive assault.

Ais reached the wall with a yell, reaching through an arrow hole

to snatch the end of one man's *zinkall*. The surprised archer fired his weapon into the floor as Ais grabbed hold of his arm with both hands and yanked it forward. The man's unseen body slammed against the inside of the wall, shaking the structure. Ais yanked again, smashing the body repeatedly against the wall. He heard the cracking of bone, felt the man's arm spasming in agony. With one final pull, a large section of the flimsy false wall broke free, and Ais pulled an unconscious body through the rubble.

Ais jumped through the hole, surprising the archers on the other side. The small room was much plusher than the one outside, decorated with tapestries and cushions. There was an open window on the far side, and he briefly caught a glimpse of Lokmlen's Kershtian face slipping out of the room and down a rope ladder.

Ais didn't have time for an extended look, however, as the archers around him reacted, pulling their arms out of the arrow holes to point at him. His own weapon was already raised, however, and he fired an arrow point-blank into the nearest archer's eye. He ducked as the man screamed, hearing *zinkallin* releases sound from either side as the archers foolishly shot at one another.

Ais rolled to the side, whipping his sword from its sheath. The shiny black carapace blade found its place in a second archer's chest as the man realized his zinkall's three shots had already been expended.

Ais fought two battles as he attacked—one against the archers, and one against himself. The rage barely surfaced, however. He had learned to control it well, especially in battle.

A moment later, the fight was over. His insane assault had forced to archers to stop firing at his trackts, and seconds afterwards Ais's well-trained men had regrouped and followed him through the hole. The archers, horribly out-numbered, quickly began to surrender. Even as they did so, Ais was leaping through the window and swinging recklessly down the ladder in pursuit of his real quarry.

"You know, you're a fool for coming back."

Iador the boatman looked up a his passenger's comment, confused. The passenger, however, wasn't looking at Iador. The man stood at the front of the small rowboat, heedless of its

rockings, as he stared at the approaching city of Kezare. Eventually, Iador decided he wasn't being addressed, and tried to ignore his strange passenger.

"It's so hot on this side," the passenger continued, speaking conversationally. "You hate heat. And all that sand getting into your shoes and your lungs… it's horrible."

Iador continued to row. His passenger was definitely an odd one. His skin marked him as Lossandin, but he spoke as if he'd been out of the country for some time. He had curly brown hair that sat like a disheveled mop on his head, and was a bit overweight. His clothing was very irregular—it resembled the things that Iador had seen darksiders wearing in the marketplace. The clothing was constructed of may layers of cloth, and the bottom piece was divided like leggings, but not as tight. There were strange clasps and buckles everywhere. Darksider clothing had always confused Iador—why wear something with so many pieces when a robe worked just as well?

"Of course," the man continued, "you did have a noble purpose in coming. You haven't seen Kenton in three years, and he was once your best friend." The man paused for a moment. "Too bad he's dead," he added. "Of course, you always said becoming a sand master was a bad decision."

Iador raised his head. Sand master? Quietly, Iador made a *Ker'Reen* warding against evil. He wasn't Kershtian, but he was a God-fearing man. More than half the Lossandin people he knew worshiped the Sand Lord now. The Kershtian religion made so much more sense than the old Lossandin gods, who had practically been forgotten over the last century.

Slowly, Iador shook his head. He knew he should have refused to ferry this stranger, this man who looked like a daysider but dressed like a darksider. Now it looked like the man was a sand master—or, at least, was familiar with them. Not good at all. The Sand Lord frowned on those who fraternized with the demon *Ry'Kensha*.

"Well," the man said with a sigh, "I suppose you can still pay your respects at his funeral. Maybe there'll be food."

Iador pulled the boat into the docks, moving as quickly as he could, for he was eager to release his passenger. The man didn't

comply with Iador's sense of urgency, stretching leisurely, then reaching behind to pull out a strange darkside cloth bag he hung by a strap from his shoulder. Then he stepped up onto the dock, pulling out a couple of lak and handing them to Iador.

"Thanks for the conversation," the man said absently, wandering away from the docks.

Ais dashed through the crowd, pushing his way through the confused people. Those ahead him tried their best to get out of his way, but the crowd made it difficult. The press grew worse the closer they neared the docks, slowing his progress even further. Fortunately, Lokmlen wasn't moving any more quickly, despite his cursings and shovings. Eventually, the man ducked to the side, running into an alley. Ais reached the same spot a few seconds later, leaving behind the crowd and its cries of anger and surprise as he entered the alley.

Immediately, a *zinkall* arrow whizzed past his head. Ais cursed, firing a shot of his own blindly into the alley as he ducked to the side, pressing up against the building's wall, using a pile of chipped clay bricks as cover. A second later he heard footsteps retreating down the alley, and he hissed quietly, leaping over the pile of rubble to follow. After just a second of running, however, he heard a noise to the side of him, and caught movement in his peripheral. He ducked just in time to avoid the sword strike that followed.

Lokmlen leapt at him from behind another pile of rubble, attacking deftly with a thin-bladed Lossandin sword. Ais parried, blocking with his own Kershtian weapon, whose carapace material lent itself better to thicker, wider blades. The two traded blows, fighting in the unique manner of dayside fencing. The swords were almost secondary to the battle—the *zinkallin* were what mattered. Both Kershtians fought carefully, their left arms kept outstretched to the side, using their *zinkallin* like bucklers when necessary, but mostly holding them in reserve, searching for an opportunity to fire. *zinkallin* made decent medium-ranged weapons, but their true deadliness was at short, man-to-man ranges. A point-blank shot from a *zinkall* could easily be deadly—and, even if it wasn't, a man fought very poorly with an arrow sticking from his chest.

Lokmlen fought well, better than Ais had expected. Of course, the man had managed to murder three trackts, which said

something for his skills. After just a few seconds of fighting, it was obvious who was the better fighter. Ais was an exemplary trackt, but his true talents were in investigation and leadership. He was only moderate when it came to sword-play. If he was going to win the battle, he would need to get in a good shot with his final arrow.

And, fortunately, one came quickly. Lokmlen ducked to the side, leaving himself open to fire as he turned back to the battle. Ais moved instinctually as he swung his left arm around, drawing aim on his opponent's chest. Too late he realized Lokmlen's feint. The thief had lowered his arm in what Ais assumed was a balancing move, but was really putting himself in to position to fire. Not at Ais's chest, which would have been too obvious, but at his leg.

Lokmlen fired first, and Ais felt a searing pain in his leg. His own shot, thrown off Lokmlen's attack, went wild, and his final arrow snapped uselessly against the alley wall.

Ais stumbled back against the side of the alley, gritting his teeth against the pain, holding his sword defensively. Lokmlen raised his arm. He had fired twice already—he might still have an arrow left.

"Surrender, *zensha*," Lokmlen ordered. *Zensha.* Traitor.

Ais smiled, then launched himself at Lokmlen. If the man had another arrow, he would have fired it.

Sure enough, Lokmlen lowered his arm, blocking Ais's attack with a curse. Now the swordfight truly became intense, both men using their *zinkallin* as shields, blocking with the thick carapace shells. Ais, however, was wounded, and his mobility was severely hampered. In addition, Lokmlen was a much better swordsman. There was only one way this battle could end.

"The Sand Lord has left you weak, traitor" Lokmlen whispered in Kershtian. "I've met children with more skill. This is what you betrayed your people to become?"

Ais continued to fight, throwing himself into the battle with zeal. Lokmlen blocked deftly, waiting for Ais's strength to run out. Ais stepped forward, then slipped on his own blood, which poured from his wound. Lokmlen's blade immediately struck, biting into Ais's arm.

And, deep within, Ais began to feel his control slip.

His swings became more wild, his vision began to blur. As it had happened so many times before, Ais's secret revealed itself. He

began to beat at Lokmlen, using his sword almost like a club. He heard the growls coming from his throat. He felt the spittle running down his chin. His body began to grow numb.

Lokmlen deftly, almost leisurely, dodged Ais's blows. Ais continued to attack, but the quiet side of his mind, the side that remained conscious even during moments of rage, knew the battle was over. Rage didn't impart power, it didn't give strength like the stories said. All it did was make him lose control. An unseen strike from Lokmlen took him on the arm, and Ais spun. He could barely feel the pain. He used his spin to build momentum, screaming in anger, striking at his opponent.

His hand, empty, passed in front of Lokmlen's face, carrying no weapon.

Stupefied, Ais looked at his bloodied hand, then noticed his sword on the ground. It had slipped from his numb fingers following Lokmlen's last strike.

Ais felt himself slide to the ground in despair. *You always knew this day would come. The day when your secret finally killed you. All those years of struggling, all your time in the Hall, forcing yourself to become a model of control. Wasted.*

Lokmlen raised his blade, using it to snap Ais's *DaiKeen* symbol off his forehead. "You are a disgrace, *trackt*," Lokmlen hissed. "I give you now to the Sand Lord's judgement." Then moved to strike.

"Um, excuse me?"

Lokmlen looked up at the sound, confused. Ais did as well, his vision clearing slightly as the rage backed away. A figure stood in the alley, a shorter man of husky build with dark curly hair and an oblong bag slung over his shoulder.

"Now, I realize it's probably none of my business," the newcomer said, leaning against the side of the alley. "But, don't you think the poor man has had enough for one day? I mean, I'm a strong proponent of humiliating trackts, but killing them is a bit extreme."

Lokmlen bent down, picking up Ais's sword and tossing it to the newcomer. The man caught it with a deft movement of the hand. Ais watched the exchange with a measure of returning sentience.

"If you wish to fight me, stranger, then I accept your challenge," Lokmlen said, raising his blade.

The newcomer eyed the sword with a distasteful look, tossing it aside as if it were some kind of venomous sandling. “Thank you, but no,” the man said. “Swords and I don’t get along very well together.”

Lokmlen snorted. “I don’t think you have much choice,” he said, and attacked with a quick, precise thrust.

Which the stranger dodged.

Ais watched, struggling to regain control of his rebellious body. The stranger didn’t look like a warrior—he didn’t act like one or move like one, not to mention his obviously out-of-shape body. But, when Lokmlen struck, that all changed for a brief second. The stranger altered his stance, dropping his bag and suddenly moving with a fighter’s fluidity. He easily dodged out of the weapon’s way, then immediately fell back into his relaxed, pedestrian stance.

Lokmlen frowned, pulling his weapon up to regard the stranger, who now stood leaning leisurely against the alley’s other wall. The assassin struck again, obviously with a more determined thrust, but again the stranger somehow wiggled past his blade.

Ais didn’t know who the stranger was, but as his sentience returned, he thanked the Sand Lord for the man’s arrival. Slowly, Ais slipped a small *zinkall* arrow from the quiver tied to the back of his belt and loaded it into the front of his weapon.

Lokmlen was attacking continuously now, fencing with the stranger like one would an armed opponent. Yet, the stranger continued to keep just barely out of the sword’s path. The weapon wove and sliced, sometimes coming close enough to the stranger that Ais could hear its tip tear at the soft darkside cloth. He never drew blood, however.

Finally, the stranger pulled an odd feint, jumping forward instead of backward and catching Lokmlen’s weapon in one hand. The move put the two men face-to-face, one confused, the other smiling happily. Then, the stranger released the weapon and proceeded to slam the heel of his boot into his opponent’s foot.

Lokmlen cried out, dropping his sword in pain. The stranger nodded cheerfully to Ais, who had just finished pumping his *zinkall.* Ais raised the weapon, pointing it threateningly at the disarmed assassin.

“Eric’s first rule of combat,” the stranger said, picking up his

pack and waving farewell to Ais as he strolled back toward the street. “Always go for the toes.”

Ais handed Lokmlen off to a couple of trackts guarding the front of the thieves hideout. He ignored their suggestions that he let a healer see to his wounds—none of them were very bad, and had stopped bleeding now that he had them bound.

He quietly strode up the steps to the top floor. In the back room he found members of his band cleaning up and searching through potential evidence.

“Sir, you’ll want to see this,” one of them said, nodding toward the side of the room.

Ais followed the gesture, noticing a man sitting against the wall, a healer at his side. The man wasn’t a trackt or a thief—he wore the colorful robes of a rich man, though those robes were stained with filth and blood. The man held his face in his hands, shaking with quiet sobs. Though his features were obscured, the man’s scraggly beard and emaciated body bespoke a lengthy imprisonment.

“Who?” Ais asked quietly.

“Torkel,” the trackt replied.

Ais frowned, trying not to let his surprise show on his face. Torkel was a wealthy landowner, advisor to the Lord Merchant himself. The man and his family had disappeared during a trip down the river over half a year ago. It had looked like a boating accident.

“We found him in a chamber hidden in the closet,” the trackt said in a hushed voice. “Along with… the corpses.”

“Corpses?” Ais asked.

“His wife and children,” the trackt explained solemnly. “Apparently, Torkel used to be one of Sharezan’s informants. When he tried to back out, Sharezan wasn’t pleased. They locked him in the closet, killed one of his family members every month, and tossed the bodies in with him.”

It was nearly enough to make the rage return. This time, however, Ais fought it down, keeping his face under control.

I will find you, Sharezan. Nilto. By the Sand Lord, I will catch you.

This was why he chased the man. This was what drove him to work at this case as he had no other. Sharezan wasn’t just a

criminal, wasn't just a murderer, he was a maniac. Torkel wasn't the first one he had tortured to the point of insanity. Not by far.

"See that this man's involvement in Sharezan's operations is kept quiet," Ais ordered. "He has suffered enough."

The trackt nodded.

Ais turned and looked back into the main room, where *zinkall* arrows lay scattered around the floor, tables and chairs toppled by the battle. Ais held his mask of emotionless in front of him like a barrier as he surveyed the scene. He counted black-dressed bodies with cold eyes. Six dead, one of them Jedan. Stiffly, he stepped through the hole between the rooms, ignoring the bloodied body laying in the amongst the rubble.

"Tain, you're now Second," he said flatly as he passed his Third, who knelt beside Jedan's corpse.

Several trackts stood, watching Ais as he walked toward the exit. The new members of Jedan's band. "Great Sand Lord!" one of them whispered, barely audible as Ais left the room, "doesn't he have any feelings at all?"

Ais bowed his head as soon as he was out of view, sighing to himself an shuddering slightly. Then he looked up, forcing his face to be flat, to be strong. *Control. It is all about control…*

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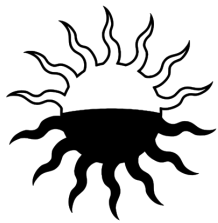

"Young Kenton, would you mind helping an old woman to her quarters?"

Kenton turned with surprise. Heelis, the Lady Judge herself, was standing behind him. People were flowing from the judgement chamber, most of them eagerly discussing the day's events. Many had paused to congratulate him on his arguments, though Kenton didn't see what they found so impressive. A two-week forestallment of the Diem's destruction was hardly a stunning victory. Still, he had accepted their praise graciously, though his first reaction was to spurn them. He was quickly coming to understand that he couldn't afford to make enemies amongst Lossand's elite. He already regretted his treatment of the Council in years past.

Which was why he hadn't expected to see any of the Taisha approach him. The elderly Heelis, however, appeared to have lost all of her earlier hostility. She now stood before him with an unreadable expression, her wrinkled eyes studying him.

"I'll help her, if you want," Dirin offered.

"No, Dirin," Kenton said slowly. "Wait for me outside the Hall. I will escort the Lady Judge."

"Quite kind of you, Lord Mastrell," Heelis said, extending her arm for him to take. She wore a long gown of Hall black, loose at the waist, and the only jewelry she wore was a silver necklace.

Kenton let the Lady Judge lead as they strolled away from the judgement chamber and its chattering crowds, walking around the periphery of the hall. Most of the pyramidal building's space was taken up by the central chamber, and, as Kenton recalled, the rest was filled with offices. Heelis moved leisurely, not speaking at first, leaving Kenton to ponder on what it was she wanted to tell him.

"You are much like your father, young Kenton," she finally said.

"I don't know, My Lady. I am stubborn like he was, perhaps," Kenton said with a slight frown.

"Stubborn," Heelis agreed, "and contradictory."

Kenton blushed slightly.

Heelis laughed to herself. "Don't be too ashamed of your nature, child. There is a vague line between being contradictory and being discerning. Just learn when to object, and when to allow authority to do as it is intended."

Kenton walked in silence for a moment, his Lossandin boots—tightly wrapped to keep the sand out—falling softly on the Hall's stone floor. "I must confess I'm confused, My Lady," he finally admitted. "Aren't you angry with me?"

"Yes," Heelis admitted. "You arrived at a very inopportune time, young Kenton. No one likes to be surprised at the last moment."

"But you were going to destroy the Diem!" Kenton objected.

"After a manner, yes," Heelis admitted.

"I couldn't let that happen."

Heelis sighed quietly. "Do you understand the responsibility you have taken upon yourself, young Kenton?"

Kenton smiled. "Now *you* sound like my father."

"He did enjoy laying responsibility, didn't he?" Heelis said, a fond look on her face. "I will miss Praxton."

"I thought you didn't like the sand masters," Kenton said.

"Nonsense, child," Heelis returned. "I had great respect for the Diem, and especially for your father. Both grew too powerful, however, and too arrogant—those are things that breed enemies. The Diem built itself up so high that when it fell, even I couldn't rescue it."

"You would have tried?" Kenton asked with a frown. Was this the same woman who had pronounced such harsh judgement just a few minutes before?

Heelis sighed. “I did try, young Kenton. That was what I was doing today. You said yourself that the purpose of the Law was to protect, not to destroy.”

“I must admit confusion, Lady Judge. Perhaps we were attending different trials.”

“Yes,” Heelis mumbled. “Very much like your father.” Then, in a stronger tone, she continued. “The Lord Merchant and Lord General are very powerful men, Kenton—as powerful as your father was. The three of them have been vying for leadership in this nation for decades now. Once the Diem stumbled, there was no chance that the other two would let it survive. There was no way I could have saved the Diem—I could, however, allow its enemies a complete victory at first, then convince them to go easy on the remnants of your kind. The sand masters could have continued practicing, probably as a sub-Profession in the Draft.”

“We wouldn’t have had a voice in the Council, then,” Kenton objected.

“True. But you would have been able to keep your identity as a group.”

Kenton frowned. “But,” he continued, “if you are so intent on helping the Diem, why did you push such harsh limitations on its continuance? There is virtually no chance that I will be able to convince all seven Taisha to vote for me. I could have perhaps gained a majority, but a unanimous decision…”

“Ah, young Kenton,” Heelis said, staring down the corridor with slightly unfocused eyes. “You must not mistake Heelis the person and Heelis the Lady Judge. The Lady Judge must remain impartial, no matter what her personal biases. The Diem is wounded, perhaps mortally. A simple majority decision wouldn’t be enough to heal it. Now that the doubt of a practically unanimous decision has been cast against the Diem, only a complete reverse of that decision will be enough to restore the nation’s faith in sand mastery. Any less would be a disservice to the Diem—such a decision would leave it irreparably weakened. My decision was not made out of vengeance, but out of pity.”

The Lady Judge drew to a halt beside a large door marked with the Hall’s seal. “You have a chance, young Kenton. But, I will admit that it isn’t a very good one. I do not envy you.”

“Can I at least count on your vote?” Kenton asked.

Heelis shook her head. “I am afraid not.”

“But you said you don’t want to see the Diem destroyed!”

“I don’t,” Heelis agreed. “But, if destruction is in the best interest of Lossand, then that is what I must support.”

“The Diem’s arrogance is broken,” Kenton said. “There is nothing to fear from us now.”

“Arrogance will return. Wherever there is power, there is pride. Besides, it is more than the Diem’s power that I am worried about.”

“What do you mean?” Kenton asked with a frown.

“The Diem’s financial situation, for one thing,” Heelis explained.

“Financial situation?”

“The Diem has no money, Kenton,” Heelis said.

Kenton blinked in surprise. “No money?” he asked.

“Actually, it has great debts.”

“But the tributes…”

“Most Professions stopped paying tribute to the Diem a long time ago, child,” Heelis explained. “They got tired of paying the sand masters, then having the Mastrells take whatever they wanted in addition to the tribute.”

“But, the Law…”

Heelis shook her head. “The tribute wasn’t part of the Law, child. It was given out of respect and thankfulness—things that the Professions stopped feeling long ago. I might have been able to do something if the mastrells had objected, but none of them did. They actually seemed to enjoy spiting the other Professions—you see, the cessation of the tributes only gave the mastrells more reason to misuse their powers. You know that the golden sash you wear gives you the power to demand any good or service from a merchant free of charge? Technically you are supposed to pay the money back, but there is no time limit set on when you must do so.”

Kenton nodded. Such was part of the Diem’s Charter.

“Well, the less tribute the other Professions paid, the more the mastrells demanded from the Profession members, walking into their shops and procuring crafts or expensive pieces of art. There is a reason why the other Professions hate the sand masters so.”

“I didn’t know,” Kenton admitted.

“Yes,” Heelis continued. “The only Profession that has continued

to pay the tribute all this time is the Guild."

"The Guild?" Kenton asked with surprise. "The merchants? That doesn't make any sense—Lord Vey is one of the most outspoken enemies of the Diem!"

"I know," Heelis said. "It is very odd of him. Regardless, I cannot, with good conscience, vote in favor of the Diem as long as it retains such large debts. You can probably request ledgers from the separate Professions to find out exactly how much they claim you owe them, but expect to see some very large figures. This has been going on for some time."

Kenton took a breath. "All right," he said. "I'll see what I can do."

"That isn't all, young Kenton," Heelis warned. "There is also the leadership factor. If what I saw today is any indication, you are going to have a difficult time convincing the rest of your sand masters to follow you. A Profession that cannot agree on its own leader is not stable enough to maintain its status and Taisha."

"I'll find a way to bring the other sand masters to my side," Kenton informed.

"Not just sand masters, child," Heelis warned. "I must lay one more task upon you. The Professions represent the people of Lossand. We govern by their sufferance. If the people are morally opposed to sand mastery, then I would not be able to continue to support you. First you must convince the Diem to accept you, but then you must convince Lossand to accept the Diem."

Kenton sighed. He had assumed his task impossible, but now… he not only had to persuade all seven Taisha to rescind their votes to destroy his profession, but he needed to pay off the Diem's debts and convince the nation to accept him. How would he manage such a task in two weeks?

"I warned you, Lord Mastrell," Heelis said, opening the door to her rooms and stepping in. "May the Sand Lord watch over you."

"I'm certain He will," Kenton mumbled as she shut the door. "He's probably eagerly awaiting my failure."

Kenton found Dirin waiting patiently beside the Hall's outer steps, contentedly buffing a carapace statue's head. "Dirin," Kenton mumbled as he approached, "you're too sands-cursed good for your own good."

“What?” Dirin asked as Kenton strode down the steps.

“Never mind,” Kenton replied, looking across the small courtyard before the Hall. The crowd had mostly dispersed, leaving a few scattered groups. None of them, however, wore sand master white. “Where is everyone?”

Dirin grimaced slightly. “They… went with Drile.”

“*Aiesha*,” Kenton cursed. “Come on, back to the Diem.”

They found the sand masters gathered in the Diem’s inner courtyard. The courtyard, filled with sand, of course, was large—much wider than any of the Diem’s four sides. Lines of small, separate balconies ran along the second and third floors—entrances to the private chambers of mastrells and other high-ranking sand masters. In the direct center of the courtyard was a free-standing mushroom-shaped structure, the building where the sand masters had met.

In front of this meeting-house stood Drile, speaking authoritatively to the collected remnants of the Diem. His firm-featured square face was calm as he looked at different sand masters in turn, demanding something Kenton couldn’t hear. Around his waist he wore a golden sash.

“Drile!” Kenton demanded as he approached. “What are you doing?”

Drile ignored Kenton, speaking to a Diemfen in a brown sash. “You swear?” he asked the man.

“I do,” the Diemfen—Terr was his name—affirmed.

“All right, then you may count yourself in,” Drile promised.

Kenton pushed his way through the group of sand masters. “Drile, what on the sands are you doing!” he repeated.

Drile raised an eyebrow, finally turning toward Kenton. “Why, I’m distributing rooms on the top floor, *Lord Mastrell*. The mastrells no longer need them.”

Kenton snorted. “And tell me, Drile, what criteria are you using to judge who gets to live on the top floor and who doesn’t?”

Drile shrugged slightly. “I choose those who seem most likely to be loyal to… the mastrells.”

“Or most likely to you, I suspect,” Kenton shot back.

Drile turned away from Kenton then, nodding to the next Diemfen in line. “So tell me, why do you think I should let you have

a place in the mastrells quarters?”

“Drile,” Kenton ordered, “stop this foolishness.”

Drile didn’t turn. “Why should I?” he asked nonchalantly.

“Because it’s ridiculous,” Kenton said. “If we’re going to give away rooms, we’ll do it in an orderly fashion, by rank.”

Drile turned with a raised eyebrow. “But Kenton,” he said with mock consternation on his face, “weren’t you always the one who said that rank shouldn’t matter? That power was a poor means of judging a sand master?”

“I…” Kenton said, stunned.

Drile snorted, turning back to his task.

Kenton closed his mouth, still stupefied by Drile’s rebuttal. *By the sands, he’s arrogant!* Kenton thought with amazement. *He’s acting like… like I used to. Oh sands…*

“Look, Drile,” Kenton said, gathering his thoughts. “We can discuss this later, find a fair means of distributing the rooms. Let me think about it for a little while first.”

Drile sighed, shaking his head, but he did turn to face Kenton once again. “And why should I listen to you? You have no authority over me.”

Kenton felt himself growing angry. “I was appointed Lord Ma—”

“Let us move this meeting somewhere else!” Drile announced in a loud voice, interrupting Kenton as he spun to face the collected sand masters. “Say… in the very rooms we are discussing? Yes, let us move to the third floor. All of those who are able, that is.”

Drile turned with a smile, shooting Kenton a victorious look as the sand around his feet exploded with light. The sand rose around Drile like a vortex of light, lifting him into the air, ribbons of sand whipping lightning-like around him. He landed on the third-floor balcony of what had once been the Lord Mastrell’s chambers, and casually walked inside.

Around Kenton sand masters regarded him with embarrassment or amusement. Then the fourteen Diemfens and several of the more powerful fens gathered their sand around themselves and began to rise into the air. None of them were as showy as Drile, of course, and several were barely strong enough to lift themselves so high. Kenton was left standing red-faced, surrounded by a small crowd of fens, underfens, and acolents.

Very clever, Drile, Kenton thought. A short time ago, that little move would have ended the argument.

Slowly, Kenton reached into his sand pouch and pulled out a handful of sand. Hesitantly, irrationally fearing that his experience before entering the Hall had been a fluke, he called the sand to life. It pulsed and shifted warmly in his hand, shining with the familiar glow of sand mastery. He sent it in a ribbon to the courtyard floor, where he gathered sand into it. Then he split the one ribbon into three.

The sand flashed, rising like three trails of smoke to surround him. Immediately a wave of surprised whispers ran through the crowd around him. Kenton raised his head, looking up at the third floor with trepidation. Historically, three ribbons was the minimum amount required to lift a sand master more than a few feet in the air. Many sand masters who could control three, or even four, ribbons still couldn't lift themselves to such a height. What if he still wasn't powerful enough?

Taking a deep breath, he gathered his ribbons beneath him, one underneath his feet and one underneath each of his arms. Then, he pushed.

Air rushed around him, battering his face and his clothing as he shot into the air like a *zinkall* arrow. He cried out, surprised at the force of his jump, as he passed the balcony and continued into the air.

Kenton floundered in the maladroit leap, finally reaching his apex a full twenty feet above the Diem's roof. He ordered his sand ribbons to him, realizing with horror the drop that awaited him. Fortunately, he was good at falling—even the weakest sand master could slow a fall enough to keep himself from being seriously hurt. He sent the ribbons forward as began to plummet, using them to guide him towards the balcony and slow him to a reasonable speed.

His feet slapped against the carapace balcony, leaving him disoriented, his heart racing. The jump became worth it, however, the moment he saw Drile's face. The former mastrell stood at the back of the room's inner chamber. He stood with his mouth open, his voice swept away by complete amazement. His arm, which had been raised, dropped lethargically to his side as he leaned forward. Kenton could almost hear Drile's mind counting Kenton's ribbons

over and over again.

Kenton stepped forward, letting his ribbons swirl predominately around him. “I thought I told you to stop this foolishness, Drile,” he said in a quiet, but firm, voice.

“I…” Drile trailed off, counting again. “Three?” he asked with confusion.

Kenton stopped right in front of Drile, then raised his hand and pointed at the door. “Get out of my father’s room!” he ordered.

“And why should I obey an obvious traitor like yourself?” Drile demanded.

Kenton paused. “Traitor?” he asked incredulously.

“Tell us why you came back so late, Kenton,” Drile whispered. “Tell us where you have been? Did the Kershtians treat you nicely while you received your payment from them? Or, did they turn you away like the filth you are?”

“What are you taking about?” Kenton demanded. Surely Drile wasn’t insinuating…

“We all know someone betrayed the Diem, Kenton,” Drile informed. “We’ve all figured it out. Isn’t it convenient that you disappeared in the middle of the battle, then arrive here safely, travelling alone across the *kerla?*”

“There’s only one traitor here, Drile,” Kenton hissed. “And it isn’t me. There is only one man bitter enough at the Diem for taking away his rank, one man with a streak of vengefulness strong enough to commit such an atrocity.”

Drile’s eyes grew wide with anger. “You accuse me?” he demanded. “You, traitor, dare to accuse your better?”

Kenton felt his face grow hot with rage. This was the man who had cost him his father and friends. This was the man who had nearly destroyed the Diem. And now he was trying to blame Kenton. He was a coward. Unfortunately, Kenton had no real proof that the man was a traitor—he couldn’t get him thrown out of the Diem with simple accusations.

“Get out of my father’s rooms,” Kenton said quietly, surprised at the tense anger in his eyes.

Drile looked back defiantly.

Kenton stared Drile right in the eyes, just as he had seen Praxton do on that infamous day of advancement that seemed so long ago.

He forced his will, his anger, and his rage against Drile. As he did so, Drile's eyes flickered uncertainly toward Kenton's ribbons—three instead of one.

A second later Drile turned away, nodding for his followers to join him as he stalked out of the room into the hallway beyond.

"And take off the sash," Kenton ordered. "Otherwise I'll report you to the Taisha for violating the Diem's charter."

Drile shot one look back at him—an angry, defiant look. Then he disappeared.

The other sand masters watched Drile leave, their faces muted. Once he was gone they slowly slipped from the room, some following the former mastrell, others leaving off the balcony.

When he was alone, Kenton sighed, slumping to the floor and resting his back against the room's stone wall, trying to calm his tense nerves.

Kenton sat that way for a long while, the massive aftermath of the last few days' events finally catching up to him. He had watched thousands of sand masters slaughtered, his father and friends killed. He had spent an excruciating week believing he had lost the ability to master sand. Then, when he had finally gotten it back, he had immediately been forced to take upon himself responsibilities he had never sought, and only barely understood.

His time traveling with Khriss had finally made him see what he really was, a man who fought authority because of what it was, not because of what it stood for. Now, irony had its way, and he had to deal with the very rebellious arrogance he had once projected. Except that Drile was both more powerful and more vicious than Kenton had ever been.

I'm worse than the Hundred Fools, Kenton thought with a shake of his head. *I should never have let Dirin talk me into this. What do I know of leadership? I've tried all my life to throw down authority.*

Someone was yelling down below—Kenton couldn't make out what they were saying, and he was too engrossed in his thoughts to bother walking to the window. It wasn't an angry voice—not Drile's voice—but he still had a suspicion that he didn't want to know what the person was saying.

His mind drifted back to the argument. Drile had already begun

turning the other sand masters against him. If Kenton hadn't, for some still-unknown reason, spontaneously developed the ability to master multiple ribbons, then his rule of the Diem would have ended moments after it began. He had defeated Drile this time, but he doubted that the former-mastrell would remain cowed for long.

Even as an acolent, Drile had been trouble. He had lorded over Kenton's group of students like a Kershtian monarch, often demanding that others do the research for his classes for him, other times sneaking into town to perform secret deeds with his abilities in exchange for money. He never did anything overt—he would lift heavy objects, or drill holes in stone for merchants, any small act that a sand master could do easier than other men. The frightening thing about Drile had been the way he swore the other acolents to secrecy, using his power to frighten them to the point of capitulation.

Kenton sighed, memories of the past rising fresh to his mind. The fool down below was still yelling, but Kenton retreated into his thoughts.

During the time of Drile's rampaging, the mastrells had ignored—and even encouraged—him. Kenton doubted Praxton had ever found out about Drile's prostitution of his sand mastery; that was too large a sin to be ignored. The domination of the other acolents, however, and the use of power and threats to keep them in line—all this had been suffered. It was the way of the Diem—the sooner students learned to obey those with more power than they, the sooner they would understand what it was to be a sand master.

Only two students had stood up to Drile. Traiben and, of course, Kenton himself. Traiben had been powerful enough to ignore Drile's threats, and Kenton had simply been stubborn enough not to care. Their friendship, odd because of their differences in power, had come mostly because of a common enemy.

Except, Traiben was dead now, and Kenton was left to resist the enemy on his own. Kenton could defy Drile, could mock him, but experience had shown that such would never actually accomplish anything. *Why couldn't someone else have survived? Traiben, Elorin, anyone. I can't do this by myself. I can't… why is that idiot still screaming?*

Sighing, Kenton rose to his feet, shuffling across the room

toward the balcony. “Will you kindly be—” he began to yell. Then he stopped.

Down below, a strangely familiar form stood in the courtyard’s sands, hands on his hips. Kenton frowned. The man weighed a little more than Kenton remembered, but there was no mistaking that curly hair.

“Eric?” Kenton asked incredulously. “What on the sands are you doing here?”

“Yelling myself raw, it appears,” the other man called back. “They told me you were up there—they didn’t tell me you’d gone deaf.”

Kenton smiled slightly, then frowned again in confusion. “Eric?” he repeated.

“By the Divine, all that’s sand’s affected your brain. Yes, it’s me, Eric! Now that we’ve established that, is there any way I can get up there? I’m growing a little tired of yelling.”

Still amazed, Kenton reached over and placed his hand in the barrel of sand every mastrell kept on his balcony. Immediately, three ribbons of sand flashed to life, spiraling over the railing and down toward the courtyard below. Eric yelped in surprise as the ribbons grabbed him, lifting him into the air and placing him on the balcony.

Eric dusted himself off—he was dressed in darksider clothing, a vest over a bright red shirt and a pair of loose tan leggings.

“I’d forgotten how useful that was,” he mumbled, strolling into the room.

Kenton turned, shaking his head in amazement. “Eric, you’ve… changed,” he admitted.

“Yes, well, everyone has their problems. You, for instance, are supposed to be dead.”

Kenton looked at Eric, surprised at the joke. Could this really be the straight-faced, formal boy he had known as a child?

“Here I decide to visit dayside again after a three-year absence,” Eric said, leisurely walking around the large, well-furnished mastrell’s chamber, examining the tapestries, “intending to visit my old childhood comrade. Then, a few weeks out of town, I find out he’s dead! I’m forced to wail and moan at the short life of my very best friend, continuing my travels to visit his funeral. Only I get into

town and find out my recently-deceased friend is running around quite life-like, consorting with Taisha and taking over Professions." Eric paused, turning to look Kenton directly in the eye. "I really wish you'd make up your mind."

"I apologize," Kenton replied, still a little confused at Eric's shift in personalities. He smiled anyway. "Next time I decide to come back from the dead, I'll consult you first."

"Yes, please do," Eric said, poking through several cabinets on the far side of the room. "But I'm warning you, next time you die, I'm not going to mourn you. You can just count these last two weeks as your requisite grief."

Kenton continued to regard Eric with wonder. The last time he had seen his friend, they had both been fifteen, and Eric had been boarding a boat heading south down the *Ali*. Several months later Kenton had gotten word that Eric had somehow made it to darkside, but other than that he had received no news of his friend for three years.

And, it appeared three years could produce quite a change in a man. Eric had always been so polite, so stiff. There were remnants of the boy in this man, of course—he smiled the same, a contented, ineffable smile. Eric had always been able to take abuse without growing angry. However, such hints were distorted—the man before him seemed more new than he was familiar. He was informal, spoke easily, and, of course, he wasn't wearing a sword.

"Eric," Kenton asked with bafflement, "why are you here?"

"I told you," Eric replied, continuing to search through cupboards, "I came to visit my childhood friend. How're you doing?"

"You did not cross the Boarder Ocean just to see me," Kenton said flatly. "What about your father?"

"Reegent?" Eric asked, poking his head all the way inside a cupboard so that his voice echoed. "I thought he disowned me."

"He did," Kenton admitted.

"Well, I guess he's not my father then, is he?"

"I suppose not," Kenton said. "Eric, what are you looking for?"

"Something to eat," Eric explained. "I'm starving—I saved some trackt's life today, and that's hungry work. Aren't you mastrells supposed to have hoards of food and money and things heaped

around your chambers?”

“I don’t know,” Kenton replied, “I’m kind of new to this.”

“Aha!” Eric suddenly said, pulling a thin strip of dried *ZaiDon* from the back of one of the cabinets. It looked brittle and old, facts confirmed by the dust that flew off it as Eric shook it in the air.

“You are not going to eat that, are you?” Kenton asked with a disbelieving tone.

Eric smiled, then bit of the end of the *ZaiDon*, chewing happily. He sauntered over to one of the room’s plush chairs and flopped down, continuing to chew on his jerky.

“So?” Eric asked.

Kenton frowned. “So what?”

“So, now that you’re rich and powerful, are you going to take me in? We loafers need wealthy patrons to support our continued laziness.”

Kenton took a seat of his own. “I suppose you can stay, if you want, Eric,” he said. “I don’t think I’ll be able to provide you with a home for long, though.”

“I heard,” Eric said with a nod. “Two weeks, eh?”

“You know?”

“It’s all over Kezare,” Eric explained. “How do you think I found out you weren’t dead?”

Kenton nodded. “Two weeks,” he repeated. “Two weeks to convince all seven Taisha to vote for me, show that the Diem can be financially stable, and solidify the sand masters behind one leader.”

Eric took another bite of *ZaiDon*. “That’s it?” he asked. “Sounds easy.”

Kenton snorted, rubbing the sides of his head.

“You know, you’ve changed too,” Eric noted, pointing at Kenton with the chewed end of his jerky.

“Oh?” Kenton asked.

“Yes. You’ve grown… somber.”

“Let me assure you, it’s mostly a recent acquisition.”

Eric nodded knowingly. “I understand. You shouldn’t have let yourself get into this position. Eric’s first rule of life—avoid responsibility like deep sand.”

“It’s a little bit late,” Kenton said.

“That it is,” Eric agreed. “I guess there’s nothing we can do but

make the best of it." He lounged back in the well-cushioned chair. "Even if you fail, at least we'll spend the next two weeks in comfort."

Despite the change in Eric, despite everything that had happened, Kenton couldn't help smiling. In a weird sort of way, the comment seemed to put everything back in proportion for him. He leaned back. "I suppose we will, won't we?"

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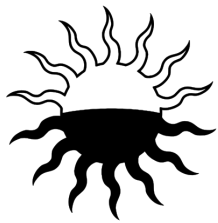

"What now, duchess?" Baon asked.

Khriss looked up at the comment. They stood just outside Loaten's house, on the darkened underground street. "Gevin's here, somewhere," she said, almost to herself.

"Loaten said that?" Cynder asked with interest.

"Well, no," Khriss admitted. "But he did admit that the prince made it to Lossand. Prince Gevalden had to have left some sort of trace. I know the Prince—he likes to be the center of attention. Someone's got to remember him. Someone willing to talk to me." She stood for a moment, her arms folded as she tapped her foot in thought. The others stood around, watching her expectantly.

What now? she thought, a little uncomfortable underneath their scrutiny. She caught Baon's eye, trying to delve some clue as to what he thought she should do, but his glassy black eyes were unresponsive.

"I guess we go to the top," Khriss decided. "If the Prince really did come to Lossand, then he wouldn't have been able to resist introducing himself to the local nobility—or, at least, the dayside equivalent."

"Which is?" Cynder asked.

"Something called a Tyshoo…"

"Taisha," N'Teese corrected. The small, dark-haired girl stood

reclining against the street wall, obviously still resentful of her forced role as Khriss's guide. "There are eight of them, leaders of the dayside Professions."

"Eight?" Acron asked curiously. "But, who's in charge?"

N'Teese shrugged. "They all are."

"Oh, come now," Acron continued. "Surely one of the eight has to rule over the others, otherwise there would be chaos."

"Some of them are said to be more powerful than others," N'Teese said. "The Lord General is respected by the others, and so is the Lady Judge."

"General," Acron said knowingly. "It appears to be some sort of feudal system, My Lady," he explained to Khriss, as if she hadn't been listening to the entire conversation.

Khriss ignored the anthropologist, instead speaking to N'Teese. "So, the Lord General is the most powerful?" she asked.

"Well," N'Teese said thoughtfully. "The Lord Mastrell used to be the most powerful, but I don't think that's the case any more…"

"What's a mastrell?" Khriss asked, forming the unfamiliar word with confusion.

"I…" N'Teese said, pursing her lips as she thought. "It's hard to explain in Dynastic. I don't think you have them on darkside. They're really powerful, though, and everyone's afraid of them."

"Are they warriors?" Baon asked.

"Not really," N'Teese replied. "More like holy men, except not holy."

"Ah. I see," Cynder said with a slight chuckle.

N'Teese blushed. "Anyway," she continued. "The rumors say all the mastrells are dead now. So I guess either the Lord General or the Lord Merchant would be the most powerful. Of course, everyone respects the Lady Judge the most."

"Lady?" Acron asked. The fat man rubbed his chin thoughtfully, not sweating for the first time since they had arrived on dayside. "A female ruler?"

"And what is wrong with that?" Khriss asked.

"Nothing, My Lady," Acron apologized. "I just wasn't expecting it. Like most primitive societies, this one is obviously male-dominated. I find it odd that they would have a woman ruler."

"Primitive?" N'Teese asked with a frown. Acron ignored her,

instead jotting down a few notes on his pocket-ledger.

"Well, then, N'Teese," Khriss decided, "please take us to see this Lady Judge." Khriss looked over toward Baon as she made the decision.

The warrior shrugged indifferently. He did, however, nod toward Acron and Cynder, who had started into an argument about primitive cultures and matriarchal societies. Khriss frowned in confusion at Baon's gesture, but the warrior followed it by nodding toward a row of houses.

"Cynder, Acron," Khriss said, finally understanding. "Why don't you two secure us lodgings here in darksider town? I assume you would rather stay here than out in the sun?"

"Well…" Acron said, his sense of comfort apparently debating with his desire to be among the dayside people. Comfort won. "Yes, that does sound like a good idea."

"Cynder, may I borrow one of your watches?" Khriss asked.

"Of course, my lady," Cynder said, fiddling in his packs for a moment to retrieve his spare pocketwatch.

"Then we'll meet back here in four hours," Khriss said.

Khriss waited impatiently, frowning as she shifted uncomfortably on the dayside bench. It was made of stone, of course—everything inside the black-walled pyramid was stark, as if intentionally crafted to be uncomfortable and foreboding.

N'Teese had called it the Hall of Judgement, but Khriss thought the Hall of Bureaucracy seemed a more appropriate name. Khriss had requested an audience with the Lady Judge, and had immediately been asked to sit down for a short wait. So far that 'short wait' had lasted nearly two darkside hours, and it didn't appear as if it was going to end any time soon.

A room full of scribes and bureaucrats shuffled around in front of her, making notes, stacking papers, and looking through ledgers. The man Khriss had talked to, a balding elderly man who was supposed to be the administrator in charge of appointments, sat speaking quietly with a group of three Lossandin men. He didn't appear to be in any hurry to follow Khriss's request.

"N'Teese," Khriss said impatiently. "Go ask him how much longer it will be."

The small girl, who sat on the floor beside Khriss's bench, rolled

her eyes. “I just did that.”

“The more you bother these sort of people, the faster they work,” Khriss said testily. “Now go.”

N’Teese sighed, but did as commanded, climbing to her feet and walking over to the man. A few seconds later she returned. “He says it will be a short wait,” N’Teese explained.

“This is insufferable!” Khriss groaned, leaning back on her bench. “Did you tell him I’m a duchess?”

“Yes, several times. I don’t think he knows what it means.”

“By the Divine!” Khriss said. “I’m the betrothed-daughter of the King himself!”

“I don’t think he knows what a King is either,” N’Teese said unhelpfully.

“When this Lady Judge agrees to see me, she had better explain herself,” Khriss mumbled. “These dayside officials certainly do have an inflated opinion of their own importance.”

She heard a quiet snort, and turned accusing eyes to the side, where Baon leaned against the wall. The warrior had waited the entire time without sitting, maintaining a loose posture, looking completely relaxed. There was a slight twinkle in his eye, as if he found their situation amusing.

“You’d better not be laughing at me,” Khriss threatened.

“I wouldn’t think of it, duchess,” Baon replied with a straight face.

“How can you stand it?” she asked, leaning back to stare at the ceiling. “This waiting is driving me mad.”

“When you’re a soldier, you learn how to wait,” Baon explained. “I doubt that is a lesson the court ever taught.”

Khriss shook her head—Baon was right. She had always been a very important person. Ever since her mother had died when Khriss was very young, Khriss had been the sole heir to the family line. Her father, a lesser nobleman, had been Duke only by marriage, and the true title had passed immediately to his daughter. There was only one Elisian house that was more important than Khriss’s own, and she had been engaged at an early age to one of its principle members.

Her marriage to Prince Gevalden was to have finally brought together two of Elis’s most notoriously rivalrous houses. Waiting

just wasn't something one did when one was that important. She hadn't ever consciously thought about it before, but when she asked for something, it was immediately sent for. When she wanted to see someone, they ignored all other appointments to meet with her.

And now it appeared as if she were being ignored. Every time she looked at Baon, she couldn't help getting the feeling that he thought the wait good for her for some reason. She didn't see what good it could do—all it was doing was making her grumpy.

Taking a deep breath, Khriss attempted to calm herself. She was capable of spending long hours pouring through books, why should waiting be any different? All she had to do was occupy her mind.

She looked around the room, searching for something of interest. The paper had fascinated her the first few moments of her wait—it was black, instead of white, and the bureaucrats scribbled on it with white-tipped pens. But the irregularity was only of passing interest. She assumed the paper was constructed from melted sandling carapace of some sort—they certainly didn't have enough wood in Lossand to waste on endless filings.

"N'Teese, tell me about these Professions," she finally requested.

The girl looked up with surprise. She had spent the two hours distractedly, occasionally disappearing for long stretches of time, leaving Khriss paranoid that the Lady Judge would finally invite them in when their translator was gone.

"What about them?" N'Teese asked.

"Well, what are they? Can anyone join any one of them? Or are they family oriented, descendants following the path of their fathers?"

N'Teese shrugged, playing absently with a pile of round pebbles on the floor. "They're all different," she explained. "A lot of the craftsmen do what their fathers did, as do the farmers, but they don't have to. The children of Mastrells almost always stay in the Diem, but if they don't have any ability, they go somewhere else. A lot of men who join the Hall's trackts or the Tower's soldiers are the first ones in their family to do so. Unless, of course, they're *Kelzin*."

Khriss frowned. Diem? *Kelzin*? So many words were unfamiliar. N'Teese spoke without bothering to explain, as if she assumed Khriss would immediately know what she was talking about.

"Wait," Khriss said interrupting. "What is a *Kelzin*?"

"*Kelzin* are kind of like noblemen," N'Teese explained. "They own lots of land, and keep it in the family. Most of them are in the Guild or the Tower."

"Guild? Tower?"

N'Teese sighed. "The Guild is merchants, the Tower soldiers. *Kelzin* in the Tower pass their rank from father to son, so most of them don't leave. Normal men can't pass ranks—not unless they can pay the Lord General the inheritance tithe. Since it takes longer than a lifetime to get to the highest ranks, most regular people have to stay in the lower ones."

All right, Guild is merchants, Tower is soldiers, Khriss thought to herself. "So, what is a track?"

"Trackt," N'Teese corrected. "They're those people with swords," she said, nodding to a tall man speaking with a scribe. The taller man wore a single piece uniform that was very sharp and militaristic at the top, but at the waist turned into a very loose skirt that went all the way down to his ankles.

"Soldiers?" Khriss asked.

"No," N'Teese said with a suffering look, "they're *trackts*. Soldiers are in the Tower, remember?"

Khriss blushed despite herself. "Of course I remember; I'm not a fool. But, they do wear swords."

"Trackts wear swords too," N'Teese said, explaining as if she were talking to a child. "They are the ones who make certain everyone follows the Law."

"Ah," Khriss said nodding. "Police."

N'Teese shrugged. "I guess.

"Okay, then what is this 'Diem' you mentioned?"

"You sure ask a lot of questions," N'Teese said with a frown.

"Now you sound like *him*," Khriss huffed. "Don't people ask questions on this side of the world?"

"Not stupid ones," N'Teese mumbled to herself.

A caustic retort rose to Khriss's lips, but she didn't have an opportunity to scold the girl. Just as she was about to speak, she noticed that the balding administrator was approaching. He stopped in front of Khriss, speaking in Lossandin to N'Teese.

"The Lady Judge will see you—" N'Teese translated.

"Finally!" Khriss exclaimed, rising to her feet indignantly.

“In three weeks,” N’Teese finished.

Khriss froze. “What?” she asked sharply.

“He says he finally spoke with the Lady Judge’s secretary, who was out for lunch,” N’Teese said, continuing to translate. “The first open space to meet with the Lady Judge is in three weeks.”

“I… I…” Khriss stammered, completely stunned. Never in her life had she been treated in such a way. Two hours of waiting, just to find out she couldn’t have an appointment for weeks.

“Tell him I don’t want the appointment,” she snapped, feeling her face grow red with anger. She turned to stalk from the room, trying to look as dignified as possible. “If the Lady Judge wants to meet me, then she can just come looking for me herself!”

Khriss marched from the room and down the hallway toward the building’s exit, Baon and N’Teese following behind.

“That last comment didn’t make any sense, you know,” Baon noted as they left through the pyramid’s broad front gates, Khriss pausing only briefly to pull out her dark glasses.

“I’m a duchess!” Khriss fumed, shoving the glasses over her eyes. “I don’t have to make sense!”

“All right…” Baon said, shaking his head. He followed behind as Khriss began walking away from the Hall down a moderately busy street. “Are we wandering somewhere specific, or did you simply pick a random direction?”

Khriss continued to march, ignoring the comment—especially since she had, in fact, picked a random direction. Finally she slowed, forcing herself to grow calm. Obviously this Lady Judge wasn’t going to be of any help.

“N’Teese,” she ordered. “Who else did you say was important in this town? The Lord General? Well, if he’s one of these *Kelzin*, like you say, then maybe he’ll have more respect for someone with a proper title.”

“Maybe…” N’Teese said without much conviction.

“Take me to him,” Khriss demanded.

Unfortunately, N’Teese’s pessimism proved well-founded.

The Tower turned out to be a tall stone structure that lived up to its name. It sat like a low-walled castle, with its own gate and squareish perimeter. Soldiers sparred and trained across its inner courtyard. The keep at the back was constructed almost like a

darkside castle, though it wasn't as high and it had a lot more windows, not to mention a domed roof.

Inside, Khriss was forced to endure a somewhat shorter—but equally infuriating—wait before being told that the Lord General wouldn't be able to see her. Apparently, he was planning some sort of hunting trip, and would be leaving in just a few hours. The soonest he would be able to see her was when he returned, just under two weeks hence. He did send a very flowery apology, however.

Khriss's anger lasted as they traipsed away from the Tower to walk halfway across the city to the Guild headquarters, a large mansion-like building with a rich interior. Here she found that didn't have to wait at all—she was promptly informed that she could see the Lord Merchant immediately. If, that was, she were willing to pay a 2,000 lak processing fee.

She returned to darksider town frustrated, angry, and several hours late.

Eventually, a very tired Khriss arrived back at the meeting place in front of Loaten's house. However, neither Acron nor Cynder were there to meet her. Instead, a distinguished-looking darksider in a simple white suit approached them and bowed. He was perhaps forty years old, and had close-cropped hair and long sideburns.

"Duchess Khrissalla?" the man asked with a Vetoian accent.

"Yes?" Khriss responded.

"I have been sent to fetch you. Please come with me."

They followed the man for a short distance to a brick-fronted house along one of the town's darkened streets. He opened the door with a white-gloved hand, standing aside to let Khriss, Baon, and a somewhat confused N'Teese in.

The room inside was comfortably darksiderish, and even appeared to have been constructed after Elisian architecture. There was a long staircase twirling up the right side of the entry hall and several doors leading off to the left. Khriss nodded approvingly, stepping forward and down a short decline to enter what should be, assuming the house followed standard format, the study. Inside she found Cynder sitting contentedly in a houserobe, chewing on the end of a pipe and sitting in front of a glass-fronted fireplace.

"Ah, duchess," he said, rising as she entered.

Khriss waved him to sit back down as she took a seat for herself. The room was tastefully decorated with plenty of wood to give it a darksider feel—there were even several books in one of the cases. The only light in the room came from the fireplace, but it was more than enough illumination by darkside standards.

"I hope dinner is already cooking," Khriss said, leaning back in a chair so plush it had probably been imported from darkside.

"Of course," Cynder said. "The cook says it will be finished within an hour. I was beginning to fear you wouldn't return in time, my lady."

"I was beginning to fear I wouldn't ever return," Khriss mumbled, taking off her shoes and rubbing her sore feet. She had never walked so much in her entire life.

"Idan, fetch the duchess some slippers, if you would," Cynder requested.

The man who had led Khriss to the house bowed and moved out of the room to perform the errand. As he did so, he passed an amazed N'Teese who still stood in the den's doorway.

"You hired servants?" she asked incredulously.

"Of course they did," Khriss said with a frown. "I told them to find us a place to stay, didn't I?"

"Well, yes…" N'Teese said.

"Well, houses come with servants, don't they?" Khriss asked.

"Actually, not on this side of the world, apparently," Cynder informed. "We had to hire them separately. Of course, they were very happy to find work. Apparently there is a dearth of nobility here on dayside—most of the people who flee the Dynasty tend to be of the lower classes for some reason." Cynder chuckled at his own comment as Idan returned with a pair of slippers for Khriss.

"You people are amazing," N'Teese mumbled.

Khriss frowned, still not certain what was bothering the girl. "I don't understand, N'Teese. Why wouldn't we hire servants? How would we eat if we didn't?"

"I don't know. Fix it yourself?"

Cynder snorted quietly. "You've obviously never tasted a noblewoman's cooking," he mumbled.

Khriss ignored the gibe. "Where is Acron?"

"Shopping," Cynder explained. "It appears that our gemstones

are worth even more than you thought—much more than our gold or silver. We got several thousand lak for each one we sold; we could probably live here for the rest of our lives on what we earned."

"Then that merchant back in the first town *did* cheat us!" Khriss growled.

Cynder smiled, his aged eyes twinkling. "My Lady appears to be in a rare humor this hour."

Khriss sighed as Idan brought her a cup of warm tea. "You have no idea," she said, sipping at the liquid—it was the perfect temperature, considering the relative heat on dayside.

"The rulers didn't know of the Prince's whereabouts?" Cynder guessed.

"Worse. None of them even agreed to see me!"

"Really?" Cynder asked, genuinely surprised. "I guess we are far from where our titles mean anything, aren't we?"

Khriss just shook her head, sipping her tea. "Perhaps one of the others will let me in. I only tried three of the eight."

Suddenly, they heard the sound of the front door opening. A moment later Acron's bulk appeared in the doorway, followed by three darksider packmen bearing bundled packages.

"That was the most enjoyable day I have ever spent!" Acron announced to the room. He was wearing a bright red dayside robe and three different medallions on his forehead. He also, Khriss noticed with a sigh, was wearing a black *zinkall* on each arm.

"The cultural experience of shopping in a market where no one speaks your language!" Acron explained, seating himself and taking a cup of tea from Idan. "Even when I traveled the Dynasty, everyone spoke the same language. Never have I been immersed so completely in a different culture. It was exhilarating—oh, you can set those over here."

The packmen obliged, placing the packages on the floor beside Acron's chair, then went to Idan for payment. The butler dutifully counted out a lak for them each, and they left.

"You wouldn't believe the things I found!" Acron said, still excited. He began to unwrap packages, pulling out bowls, rugs, utensils, and other random articles. "Works of art carved by primitive fingers, exotic clothing… even an intricate hourglass like

none I've ever seen. Oh, and I purchased some clothing for you, duchess. I assumed you were growing tired wearing the same things every day."

Khriss perked up slightly as he pulled out a package and handed it to her. Inside she found several dayside robes of different styles, all of them colored slightly—none as bright as darksider clothing, but much better than the standard dayside grays and tans.

"Thank you, Acron," she acknowledged. "This is the first pleasant thing that has happened to me all day."

"Oh?" Acron asked, happily turning a massive hourglass—actually, five hourglasses in a row, each one smaller than the one before—and watching it with intrigued eyes.

"The duchess had a less-than-successful day of information gathering," Cynder explained, still puffing on his pipe.

"Be cheered, My Lady," Acron said dismissively. "It's only the first day. We'll find the prince." He didn't, however, seem half as interested in Gevin as he was in the dribbling sand. Eventually, he put the glass aside and sighed. "It was quite the taxing day, however," he admitted. "If you don't mind, My Lady, I think I'll have the man there draw me a bath before we eat."

"Oh, do we have running water?" Khriss asked with surprise.

"Unfortunately, no," Cynder replied. "But we do have a well right outside, and I ordered a couple of houseboys to being warming water for our evening baths."

"Baths?" N'Teese asked, almost forgotten near the doorway.

Khriss smiled. "Yes, baths," she said, imagining the luxury.

"In water?" N'Teese asked.

"Now who's asking stupid questions?" Khriss returned.

"Daysiders have an aversion to water, My Lady," Idan explained in his deep voice. "They are afraid of swimming, and find the idea of immersing oneself in water extremely discomforting."

"The probably assume they'll melt," Cynder mumbled.

"How odd," Khriss said. "I guess it makes sense. They don't take baths at all, then?"

"It is customary to wipe oneself down with a damp cloth before one dresses after waking," Idan explained.

"How sad," Khriss said. "They'll never know the luxury of floating, surrounded by warm water."

N'Teese was growing increasingly pale as the conversation continued. "You people are too strange," she finally decided, standing. "I'm leaving—you don't need me any more today."

"If you wish," Khriss agreed. "Of course, you'll miss dinner."

N'Teese paused. Then, resentfully, she sat back down. "I'll leave after dinner," she mumbled.

Ais checked the moon with a distracted look, noting the time. It was approaching twelfth hour but, of course, the city was still active. Though most of the important officials followed Taisha standard time, working from fourth hour to ninth hour, Kezare itself never slept. The streets were slightly less busy during off hours, but the change was barely noticeable.

For Ais, it was time to sleep. He kept Taisha standard, and twelfth hour put him well past his normal bedtime. His tired eyes and fatigued body agreed with the supposition. Unfortunately, he couldn't sate them. He had too much work to do.

With a quiet sigh, he walked up the Hall's steps. He ignored the larger entry doors, which had been shut hours ago, and instead opened a smaller door at the side. It was unlocked, of course—trackts patrolled Kezare's streets all hours of the day.

Ais closed the door, closing out the sun's light and the city it watched. He nodded to the trackts just inside the front door, and they saluted back, standing rigidly as he passed. Temmin and Len were their names. Temmin had already applied for one of the empty positions in Ais's investigation band. Ais had his file, and two dozen like it, stacked on his desk awaiting his decision.

I make a mistake, killing a fourth of my band, and still they line up to get in, he thought with amazement, turning right and following the hallway toward his chambers.

This time there were far too many open positions. It had taken Ais the better part of the day to visit all of the widows his mistake had caused, to inform his men's parents, wives, and children of their loss. A few of them had blamed him, as they had a right to do, but most hadn't said anything, taking the news with sickened looks that warned that they had expected such an event to happen some day.

Oh, Ker'Naisha, Ais thought as he unlocked and opened the door to his chambers, *your eternal workings brought much grief*

this day.

His personal chambers were neat and unadorned—many accused Ais of lacking imagination. They were right. Ais had little use for imaginative decorating, frills or pictures to distract the mind. The Hall was a place of work and efficiency.

On his desk sat two piles of black paper. One contained the files on all who had applied for his band, the other the paperwork for each of the men he had captured in the safehouse. The judges wanted to know which of them Ais intended to charge, and with what crimes.

Ais shook his head, rounding the desk, constructed of two stone pillars and a carapace top, to sit down and begin to sift through the papers. It was looking as if he would be going home late once again—of course, the day had been a disaster so far, why not let the unpleasantness continue? Not only had Ais lost a good number of men, but Lokmlen refused to implicate Nilto as the motivation behind his killings. Ais's men had lost their lives for nothing—he was no closer to proving that Nilto and Sharezan were the same person than he had been weeks ago.

And then, on top of it all, Ais had found out that the Diem continued to exist. As a senior trackt, Ais was privy to information that others did not have. He had known about the Lady Judge's plan to shut down the Diem, and had approved of it. The sand masters were blasphemy poorly masked as people, their mere existence an affront to the Sand Lord. Ais may have chosen to disobey tradition and join the Hall, but he was still Kershtian. He followed the Priest's *DaiKeen*. He often found it ironic that he, as a representative of the Law, was forced to protect the very beings that he accepted as his God's eternal adversaries.

In addition, Ais had other reasons for hating the sand masters. The mastrells, with their golden sashes, often made mockery of the Law. When the Law had been written, and Lossand formed from a group of smaller warring countries, the only way to persuade the sand masters to join with the new federation had been to give their mastrells near-immunity from the Law. Mastrells could take from merchants without fear of retribution. Mastrells were not required to follow the commands of a trackt, even in the case of an emergency. Mastrells could not be brought to trial, or even arrested,

without the permission of the Lord Mastrell.

The sand masters were Lossand's deepest and ugliest stain. It was because of them that the A'Kar named Lossand a nation of heathens, even though a large percentage of its people now believed in the Sand Lord. If it weren't for the sand masters, then it would have been all right for Ais to join the Hall. It was because of the sand masters that Ais was rejected by his own people, called traitor even by murderers like Lokmlen…

Ais took a sharp breath, calming himself. Slowly, he forced his fingers to relax, letting them slide free from the tabletop, where his fingernails had been threatening to crack against the hard carapace. Ais shook his head. One thing, at least, he couldn't blame on the sand masters. There was only one person behind his lack of self-mastery.

He had done it again. He had lost control, turning from careful trackt into witless fool. Fortunately, none of his men had been there to see his shame, the secret their leader—assumed greatest of trackts—hid. Quietly, Ais closed his eyes and breathed a prayer of thanks to the Sand Lord for the stranger who had saved him. If the odd man in darkside clothing hadn't arrived, Ais would have joined the day's casualties.

With a quiet sigh, Ais picked up his long wooden pen and fitted a new tip of white ashink into its end. If he didn't get to work, then he would probably still be doing paperwork when it came time to begin his shift the next day.

He started with the second stack of papers, looking over names of criminals and deciding whom he could hold and whom he could not. Regrettably, most of the names were unfamiliar—petty thieves with small histories of crime. Ais couldn't send them to trial, for he had nothing more than assumptions. He scribbled 'No Charge, Please Release,' at the bottom of a paper, then reached over to grab the metal stamp heating over a small brazier beside his desk. He absently pressed the stamp against the sheet, letting its heat bind the ashink to the paper so it wouldn't rub away, then returned the stamp to its place and moved on to the next document.

A sudden knock at his door drew his attention away from the paper. Ais frowned. Who would be bothering him at this time of the day? He began to order them in, but the door opened before he

spoke. Ais reacted immediately, standing at attention. There was only one person who opened his door without waiting for a reply.

"My Lady Judge," Ais said formally, saluting as the elderly woman walked into the room.

"Please, be seated, senior," Lady Heelis encouraged.

Ais responded—though he did wait for the Lady Judge to seat herself in the room's other chair before doing so. Then he sat patiently, waiting for the Lady Judge to address him. It wasn't odd for her to be in the Hall so late—the Lady Judge was said to need very little sleep.

Lady Heelis studied him for a moment, her aged eyes shining with the wisdom that had gained her the most prestigious of Lossand's titles. Many years before, a young and foolish Ais had resented Heelis because of her sex. That young man had grown into a man who respected Lady Heelis more than any living person, save perhaps for the holy A'Kar himself.

"Oh, Ais, must you always be so formal?" Lady Heelis finally asked, smiling slightly. "How many years have we worked together now?"

"Eighteen, my lady," Ais said, a little surprised as he realized how many years it had been. He did not, however, soften his posture. It wouldn't have been appropriate.

Lady Heelis sighed slightly. "Always the perfect trackt, Ais," she mumbled.

If only you knew, My Lady.

"I understand that your operation today was a success," Lady Heelis offered.

"I lost six men," Ais responded. "And five more have injures that will keep them from duty for months."

"Yes," Heelis admitted. "But you captured a known murderer—you realize that Lokmlen has admitted to over a dozen assassinations besides the three trackts he killed."

Ais nodded.

"Beyond that, the archers you captured were more than simple thugs. Several of them were wanted killers as well."

Ais betrayed no hint of surprise, but he hadn't known about the archers. He had left to visit families before their interrogations.

"A sound operation, Ais," Heelis praised. "You couldn't have

known about the trap, and the casualties would have been much greater had you not broken the archers's attack."

Ais nodded slowly. "Thank you, My Lady."

Lady Heelis leaned back in her chair, a thoughtful look on her face. "And this is just one of many such operations, Ais. You have quite a reputation in Kezare."

Ais eyed the stack of applicants to his band. "I only do my duty, My Lady," he replied formally.

"Oh Ais," Lady Heelis said with a sigh. "When are you going to let me reward you as you deserve?"

I deserve to be cast out, to be humiliated, Ais thought mournfully. *If only you knew…* "If you mean a promotion, Lady Taisha, I must decline," he stated simply.

Lady Heelis regarded him with calculating eyes. It was a piercing look, a look that saw everything, that climbed in his eyes and ran rampant through his brain. It threw open every hidden door and searched every secluded secret, leaving his thoughts in a confused jumble. *Did she know*?

"Why?" the Lady Judge pried.

No. No, she doesn't know. She could not. "My reasons have been stated, Lady Judge."

Lady Heelis sighed. "I know you enjoy your work as a trackt, but I need you to do more. I want you at the head of a Hall, somewhere where you can teach others to do what you do."

A slight, uncharacteristic smile crept to Ais's lips as he replied. "Trust me, Lady Heelis, the last thing you need is a Hall full of Aises running around."

"Trust *me*," Heelis countered. "We could do much worse."

Ais considered the proposal for a minute in respect for her position. Then he shook his head. "I have some things I need to work through before I take any more steps, Lady Judge."

"And if you cannot work through them?"

"I will die first."

Seeing his resolve, Heelis nodded in quiet agreement. "And that you just might." She regarded him with those piercing eyes again, eyes that had led her to become Lady Judge. "I could command you," she pointed out.

"And I would follow your commands, Lady Judge," Ais assured.

“I know,” Heelis said with a sigh. “But I do not work that way.”

“I know.”

Heelis shook her head. “All right, Ais. But, if you refuse to rise to the rank of judge, then I have another job for you. I am taking you off of the Sharezan case.”

Ais froze. Off of the case…? He had worked for the last three years trying to implicate Nilto.

“I see that you object,” Heelis noted.

“I would never—”

“Yes, I know,” Heelis interrupted. “You would never go against orders. I realize how much this case means to you Ais, but I have something more important for you to do. Besides, Ais. I worry about you. Perhaps it’s time for you to take a short break from Sharezan. My assignment will only take two weeks of your time, then you may return to chasing him.”

Ais sat stiffly, waiting for her to continue.

“You know of the judgement today?” she asked.

“I do,” Ais replied. She could only mean one judgement.

“This new Lord Mastrell is an enormous random factor. I still can’t decide if he will benefit Lossand or destroy it.”

I have no such difficulty deciding, My Lady, Ais thought to himself.

“I want you to go to him,” Lady Heelis explained. “Tell him that I fear for his safety, and want a trackt protecting him.”

“He won’t believe that, Lady Judge,” Ais said. “Sand masters have little need of a trackt’s protection.”

“He doesn’t need to believe it,” Lady Heelis explained. “He just needs to let you follow him—which, I suspect, he will do. Kenton is in little position to deny my requests—even one to put a spy in his midst.”

“Yes, My Lady,” Ais agreed.

“Watch him, Ais,” Lady Heelis continued. “Follow him and see what kind of person he is. All I know of young Kenton is his impetuousness and his hostility toward authority, and neither are things I would find attractive in a Taisha. Report back to me on what you observe and tell me your opinion.”

“You realize what my opinion of him will be, My Lady,” Ais noted.

“I know, Ais. Your hatred of sand masters is well known—but so is your impartiality when it comes to the Law. Your job is to observe him as a trackt, not as a Kershtian. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

Heelis nodded, rising. “I trust you, Ais. Perhaps more than anyone else in the Hall. Keep an eye on this boy of a Lord Mastrell for me.” Heelis paused on her way to the door. “Oh, and Ais,” she said. “Go home and go to sleep.”

“But my paperwork—” Ais objected.

“Can be done another time, Ais. It is possible, despite what you think, to work too hard. If you still feel guilty, then consider my request an order.”

“Yes, My Lady,” Ais replied, standing formally as she left.

Ais strode through the streets of Kezare, his senior trackt’s cape fluttering behind him. Occasionally he would see a trackt in the crowds and they would nod to each other respectfully. The crowds were smaller this time of day, and many shops sat closed, their frontings and signs taken down, their doors shut while their owners slept. Still, the city was busy. Unlike a smaller village, where people tended to sleep at the same time, Kezare’s huge population pushed its occupants toward sleeping in shifts.

Ais’s thoughts were fretful as he walked. He had just lost his second, and now his band would have to continue their hunt for Sharezan without their leader—for a few weeks at least. It wasn’t a large setback, but Ais resented it nonetheless. Once again, justice was hampered because of the sand masters.

Lady Heelis’s assignment officially made this day one of the worst in Ais’s life. Not that he disagreed with her logic, or even her assignment of Ais to the duty. The Lady Judge was wise—she had her reasons for what she did. Still, however, Ais couldn’t help looking at the next two weeks with a feeling of sickness. He avoided sand masters whenever possible, but now he would have to spend nearly all of his time with one.

And, of course, this assignment would do little to help his reputation amongst Kezare’s Kershtian population. *Maybe Lokmlen was right,* he thought to himself. *Maybe I am a traitor. Maybe I’ve been fooling myself all this time, justifying my violation of the Sand Lord’s laws.*

It was a debate he'd wondered about many times. He had yet to come to a valid conclusion.

With such dark thoughts on his mind, Ais approached his house. The building he called home lay far away from Kezare's business district, in a place where land prices were more reasonable. Here the buildings were pressed just as closely together, but few of them were taller than a single story. In such an area, even a trackt could afford a house of his own—assuming he had been saving for two decades, as Ais had.

He walked quietly up the steps. It was dark inside. Empty. He pushed open the door.

"Papa!" a tiny voice exclaimed.

Ais looked down with surprise as a small form shot out of a side room and ran toward him.

"Melly," he said sternly. "You should be in bed."

"She waited up for you," his wife's voice explained. He looked up as Mellis followed her daughter into the room. Tall and thin, Mellis had the lighter hair of a Lossandin. Her face was rectangular, and her features what other men might have called plain. To Ais, however, there was no face as beautiful.

"She finally fell asleep," Mellis explained, kissing him lightly on the cheek. "But she is such a light sleeper… even the sound of the door closing woke her up."

"Did you stay up late?" Ais asked his daughter with an iron face.

"But daddy," the little girl protested softly, standing before him sheepishly, "I was scared you wouldn't come home."

Ais looked down at his young daughter, trying to retain his scolding expression. He failed.

The iron in his face melted every time he gazed upon little Melloni. Ais's scowl slowly melted into a big smile, and he scooped the little girl up into his arms and walked toward her bedroom. There were only two people on the continent who had ever seen that smile, and both of them were with him now.

He leaned to kiss his wife as he passed, and placed Melly onto her soft, sand-filled mattress. "Little KanLisht," he whispered, using Melly's Kershtian name. "I am home now, so stop worrying. Go to sleep. You must be exhausted."

"I'm okay, daddy," the girl protested, but a stern look from her

father convinced her to pull the sheet over herself and lie down. Ais kissed her on the forehead and walked out, closing the door.

“She insisted I let her stay up,” Mellis said with a sigh. “Every time I put her in bed she would sneak out and watch at the window.”

“She doesn’t seem to be the only one who refuses to go to bed at a decent time,” Ais said, wrapping an arm around his wife’s waist, noticing her tired eyes. She looked fatigued, tired beyond the late hour. Something was bothering her.

“How did it go?” Mellis asked, speaking before he could.

Ais simply shook his head, opening the door to their room and walking in. “We got him,” he finally replied.

Mellis smiled.

“Unfortunately,” he continued, sitting on their own sand mattress, feeling the fine grains give beneath his weight, “there were complications.”

Mellis looked at him questioningly, and Ais turned tired eyes to her concerned face. “Jedan,” he finally said.

“Oh, Ais!” Melloni caught her breath. “What happened?”

“A trap,” he said as she joined him on the mattress. “They had archers sealed off behind a false wall. They caught us by surprise—wounded nearly half of my men.”

“Are you all right?” she asked with anxiety, fingering the hole in his cape.

“A cut in my palm, a wound on the side of my leg,” he replied, knowing full well she wasn’t asking about bodily wounds alone. “Nothing important.”

“And Jedan…”

“It is a hard job, Mellis. People die.”

She frowned, obviously disbelieving his cold-hearted facade. For some reason, Mellis was the one person from whom he could never hide his feelings.

Ais unbuckled his uniform and slid it off. “I’ll be fine,” he said, undoing his twin Kershtian braids then pulling on a loose robe and sitting back down with a sigh

“You’re tense,” Melloni noticed, rubbing his back.

“I’m always tense,” Ais said, lying down on his stomach to enjoy his wife’s ministrations.

“That’s the truth. You need rest, Ais.”

He didn’t respond. His eyes had fallen on the floor beside the mattress. A dark piece of paper, folded in thirds. Mellis must have felt him grow tense, because she looked over with a sharp intake of breath.

“You read it,” he accused, reaching for the piece of paper as he realized the reason he had sensed fatigue in his wife’s face earlier. She must have been crying.

“I…” Mellis said quietly. “Oh, Ais. I couldn’t help it.”

Ais glanced down at the note. It was just like the rest. *I enjoy our game, Ais,* it read. *You gamble your family—I fear I have little to bet in return.* It was signed with Shaerezan’s symbol.

Ais gritted his teeth, crumpling the paper, feeling the anger rise within him. There was another reason he needed to catch Sharezan—a reason more powerful even than the Law.

“Melly isn’t the only one who is scared, Ais,” his wife whispered in a quiet voice.

Ais sat up, wrapping his arms around her. “He is only trying to scare me,” Ais explained. “The underground maintains a measure of civility—it kills trackts, not their families.”

“Are you sure?” Mellis asked, shooting a look toward Melly’s room.

No, Ais admitted to himself.

“What if she’s right, Ais? What if you don’t come home one day? Jedan didn’t.” Melloni spoke the words softly—not accusingly, just fearfully. She had never asked him to leave the Hall—both of them had been older when they married, and both were set in their ways. She knew he wouldn’t leave the Hall, just as he knew she would never act as unassuming as a Kershtian wife.

Ais didn’t answer. He just continued to hold his wife, feeling her silent tears drop on his arm.

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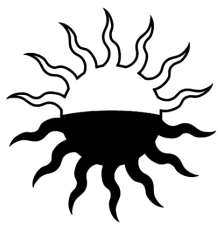

Thump, thump, thump, thump, bang. Thump, thump, thump, thump, bang. Thump, thump, thump, thump, bang. Thump, thump, thump, thump, bang.

Khriss groaned, trying to shut out the noise. Baon was exercising again. Unfortunately, it was more of a reverberation than a sound, and it continued to annoy her no matter what she stuffed in her ears. With a groan, she rolled off her bed and stumbled to her feet, groping for the door in the darkness. She stumbled out into an equally dark hallway and walked over to the door beside her own, which she proceeded to bang upon with a vindictive fist.

The thumping stopped. A moment later a sweat-covered Baon opened the door. “Duchess?” he asked. “You’re up early.”

“I know,” she said angrily, blinking drowsily at his room’s light. “What are you doing in there? Blasting off gunpowder charges?”

Baon snorted, smiling slightly. “I was exercising,” he responded, wiping his brow with a cloth.

“Well stop it,” Khriss snapped, slamming the door in his perky face. She stumbled back toward her room and flopped back down on her bed—a move that proved to be rather unintelligent. Though the bed looked like one from darkside, raised high off the ground and with posts surrounding it, there was one major difference. The mattress wasn’t filled with soft down—it was filled with sand.

At first, she'd assumed she was wrong. Who would fill mattresses with sand? It was ridiculous. Unfortunately, she had made no mistake. The mattress was only filled about half way, so the sand had room to move and fit to one's body. Still, it was incredibly uncomfortable—even if Acron did think the entire concept was 'delightful.'

At least the second layer of cloth that wrapped around the mattress was soft. *I never did find out what the daysiders use to make cloth,* her sleepy mind thought. *I'll have to ask Kenton. Oh wait, he abandoned me. I'll have to ask N'Teese.*

Unfortunately, no matter how hard she tried to fall back asleep, her body refused to comply. She heard Baon's door open, followed by retreating footsteps. Eventually the thumping began again, further away this time.

Khriss sighed, rolling onto her back and trying to avoid getting up. In her opinion, mornings were best treated by sleeping through them. Unfortunately, she couldn't get herself to fall back asleep, and so grouchily forced herself out of bed a second time.

Yawning, she wandered over to the wall and pulled the cover off the water-globe hanging on it. The room was immediately bathed in a very soft light. The luminescent grundlefish inside rose to the top, assuming she was going to feed them. Khriss found a small can of fish pellets on the side of the wall and sprinkled a few inside, watching the two fish—about four inches across each—nip at the food. Their translucent skin glowed bright yellow, and she could see their diminutive skeletons inside. At the bottom of the globe there were a few plants with long, thin leaves which waved in the current created by the swimming fish.

Khriss shook her head, moving to the room's other three water-globes, removing their coverings as well. She didn't know how someone had managed to get living grundlefish across the Border Ocean. Their water had to be changed every day to keep them from dying, and they couldn't live in salty seawater. Still, they were here, and she was thankful. On this side of the world, the heat of torches or even lamps would have been unwelcome.

The grundlefish light was soft even by darkside standards, but she was used to it. The nobility favored the fish, probably because of their expense. She sat down beside her vanity and regarded the

monster that was her hair, then began to brush.

Her room felt odd. It was almost Elisian—pieces of it felt very familiar. The bed, for instance, with its long posts and drapings was nearly the same as her own back on darkside. Yet, like most things in the house, it was slightly amalgamated with pieces of dayside. It could be seen in the mattress, the room's lack of windows, and even the brush in her hand, which had a carapace handle.

No, she couldn't forget where she was, no matter how much this room resembled darkside. Her home was an entire world away—all she had to help her were two professors, a spiteful guide, and a bodyguard who seemed annoyingly prone to thumping lately. It wasn't very encouraging.

Of course, she did have reason for optimism. Gevin was probably still alive—at least, he had arrived in Kezare alive. But, that had happened years ago. Why hadn't he returned to Elis? What could possibly be holding him to dayside?

Her hand froze. What if he'd found a girl? Some Kershtian beauty that had captured his heart? He could easily have forgotten about the shy, bookish girl that had been his betrothed…

Khriss cast such speculations aside, brushing her hair with renewed vigor. Gevin was a flirt, true, but he wouldn't so easily abandon his commitments. He had come to dayside with a purpose, and he knew that the Dynasty squatted drooling on Elis's borders. His brother Barden might be Elis's heir, but Gevin was its heart. The people loved him, and relied on his leadership. It would have taken a monumentous event to keep him from returning to them in a time of such need.

Kenton had never seen his father's rooms. Eighteen years of life, eight of them in the Diem, and he had never once visited his father's quarters. Kenton had often wondered what they would look like. And, in the end, he was disappointed.

The rooms were very bland, if one could call their gross richness bland. They held little that could be called personal—no hints that the man who had lived in them was the father of four children. There were no carpets, of course, just the thick layer of sand. The furnishings were expensive—colorful, with lots of wood. Deep, plush chairs stuffed loosely with sand. Carapace cabinets and tables trimmed with wood. The most personal object in the three-room

group was a bookshelf.

Kenton left the main room, the one that held a conference table and a group of chairs, and walked into a smaller side room. Inside was Praxton's desk, neat and orderly, a few sheets of black paper stacked on its wooden top. On the far side was the bookshelf.

Kenton read off the titles. Most were in Kershtian, of course. Even Lossandin scholars often wrote in Kershtian as a means of boosting their authority. There were some common volumes: The book of Krae—a famous work of Kershtian poetry—several volumes on the history of Lossand, a few books of Kershtian legends. Several of the volumes were unlabeled.

And that was it. The rest of the room seemed stark despite its tapestries, brocades, and blackwood-rimmed windows. Kenton sighed, strolling out of the room, kicking up sand as he went. He had hoped to find some clue as to who his father had really been. Praxton had only been dead for two weeks now, yet Kenton was having trouble remembering the man. Every time he thought about his father, him mind immediately focused on the force that was the Lord Mastrell, and not the man that was Praxton.

Kenton strolled over the balcony, overlooking the courtyard. The large hut-like conference chamber sat in the courtyard's direct center, and from his vantage Kenton could see through the large hole in the building's ceiling. The rows of benches inside were empty.

Kenton felt a loss, but he wasn't certain what to make of it. It was the same loss he had felt all his life, the void that had driven him to become a sand master. The void that had led a young boy to reject his first advancement for a still-uncertain reason. Had he really expected that simple defiance would make his father accept him? Make Praxton, who had such little use for a family that he only visited it monthly, welcome into his heart a son who had brought him nothing but disappointment?

As he pondered, however, his thoughts were interrupted by a soft ringing sound beside him. He frowned in confusion, turning toward the sound. A small, almost forgotten bell hung from the side of the banister—the method by which lesser sand masters could request a mastrell's attention. The bell was vibrating slightly, rung by a sickly-looking ribbon of sand that extended from below. The

sand glowed sporadically, its colors muted, and the ribbon was so thin that it was nearly invisible.

Kenton leaned out over the side of the balcony, looking down at the courtyard. He saw the red-haired top of a head, its hand extended, the arm shaking slightly.

“Dirin?” Kenton called.

The sand immediately fell stale, turning black as it was freed to blow away in the wind. Dirin smiled, looking up with relief. His face was exhausted.

Kenton reached over to his barrel of sand, then sent several ribbons of his own down to pick up the young acolent and raise him into the air. Kenton’s ribbons were bright and thick, but to him they had always seemed insufficient when compared to the dozens a mastrell could create. He’d rarely thought about those who were even less fortunate than himself.

Kenton deposited the acolent on the balcony beside him. Dirin took one look down at the sands three stories below and grew very pale in the face. He didn’t look down again. “Sometimes I think I’m lucky not to have enough power to lift myself in the air,” he mumbled, moving to stand safely inside the balcony doorway.

Kenton chuckled, turning around to lean with his back against the banister. “So, what do you want?” he asked.

“I just thought I should tell you that breakfast will be a little late this morning,” Dirin explained somewhat sheepishly. “I probably didn’t need to bother you, but I didn’t want you to wonder…”

“There’s going to be breakfast?” Kenton asked with surprise. “Who’s fixing it?”

“The cooks,” Dirin said with a shrug.

“I thought they left when they heard the Diem was going to be dissolved,” Kenton said with a frown.

“They did,” Dirin agreed. “But, well, after yesterday I thought I should find them and tell them that, uh, the Diem isn’t gone yet, so they could come back. So they did. But the acolents messed up the kitchen fixing their own food yesterday, so the cooks are going to be late with breakfast this morning.”

Kenton rubbed his chin in thought. “I hadn’t even considered asking the servants back,” he mused. “Good job, Dirin.”

“Oh, uh, I just thought that someone should… and you were

going to be busy, being Lord Mastrell, so…" The boy trailed off, looking down in embarrassment. As he did, however, he noticed the layer of dust on the cabinets beside the doorway. He frowned in disgust. Then, almost furtively, as if he were doing something wrong, he began to rub at the top of the cabinet, cleaning it with the sleeve of his robe.

"Did your friend find you yesterday, Lord Mastrell?" he asked as he began to dust.

Kenton looked up distractedly. "What? Oh, Eric. Yes, though he yelled long enough that people across the lake could probably hear him. I offered to let him sleep in one of the empty mastrell's quarters."

Dirin paled, stopping his cleaning for a moment. "Up here?" he asked. "But he's not… I mean…"

"I know," Kenton said with a wave of his hand. "He's not even a sand master, let alone a mastrell. But the days of mastrell elitism are over. If we don't start being more flexible, we're going to find ourselves without a profession. In fact," Kenton said thoughtfully, turning to look down as the courtyard. "Dirin, I want you to find some ladders."

"Ladders?" Dirin asked with surprise.

"Yes," Kenton continued. "Some means for regular people to reach these upper floors. I'm going to get very tired of lifting everyone up here whenever they want to come."

"All right…" Dirin said speculatively. He turned back to his cleaning. "You know, sir, I don't mean to be rude, but the rest of the students are talking about your friend. They think he's a little bit… odd."

Kenton snorted. "They're right," he admitted. "And no one is more surprised than myself. Eric and I were friends a long time ago; back then, he was about as normal a person as one could find. Of course, when you're Reegent's son, you don't have much choice…" Kenton trailed off as he saw the look on Dirin's face.

"Reegent's son?" Dirin asked with amazement. "You mean…"

Kenton nodded. "The same."

"But, then he's the Lord General heir!" Dirin said.

"Kind of," Kenton agreed. Unlike the Lord Mastrellship, the Lord Generalship was hereditary.

“I’ve heard stories about…” Dirin began.

“They’re exaggerations,” a new voice declared, pushing open the door to Kenton’s room with a lazy hand.

Dirin jumped with a quiet yelp as Eric entered. Eric, however, only smirked, nodding toward Dirin as he addressed Kenton. “Who’s the kid?”

“Someone a whole lot more useful than yourself,” Kenton shot back with a smile. “Did you sleep well? I seem to remember a time when you got up at third hour every morning.”

Eric groaned, flopping down in a chair. “Don’t remind me. My dear father always had some incredibly tedious task for me to do at such sands-unholy hours. Inspect troops, exercise, practice killing things… I still wake up some mornings convinced I’ve done something wrong. Did I hear you mention breakfast?”

“Maybe,” Kenton said, trying to follow the random topic change. “That depends on how long you spent eavesdropping.”

“Pretty much the entire conversation,” Eric admitted frankly. “I didn’t want to interrupt.”

Kenton snorted, but his retort fell silent as he heard a sound from behind him. He turned just in time to see Drile dropping from the third-floor room directly across the courtyard from Kenton’s. The former mastrell’s sand glowed and swirled around him, and he was followed by three sand masters with less-impressive collections of ribbons. None of the four men wore sashes—their robes were tied with black cords instead.

It was a statement, obviously. They wore no sashes because they didn’t accept Kenton’s authority. Kenton sighed—at least his threats had kept Drile from wearing the mastrell’s sash.

“You look like you just swallowed a sandling,” Eric observed.

“Do you remember Drile?” Kenton asked, turning away from the courtyard.

“Tall, arrogant, and annoying?” Eric asked.

“That’s him,” Kenton said with a nod.

“I seem to remember everyone thought he was the perfect sand master,” Eric said thoughtfully.

“He was,” Kenton agreed, walking into the room to take a seat across from Eric. “Now he’s just a traitor.”

“Traitor?” Dirin asked with surprise. The boy, almost forgotten,

had dusted the top of every piece of furniture in the room, and had begun to open drawers and clean the inside of them as well. Somewhere he had found an old rag to use in his efforts.

"Yes, Dirin. Traitor. There is a reason Drile was the only powerful sand master who survived the attack."

"He was lucky," Dirin admitted, "and he isn't the nicest person in the Diem, but a traitor…?"

"I've heard a dozen rumors about this," Eric cut in. "What really happened out there? Half the people I asked claimed the Sand Lord himself destroyed you—though why he would have waited this many years is beyond me. The other half claimed the mastrells weren't really dead at all, but just hiding because of some mysterious, mastrellic scheme."

"I wish to the sands I knew what had happened," Kenton admitted. "It must have been the water."

"Water?"

"Before the advancement ceremony begins, we pass around a ceremonial bowl of water," Kenton explained. "Everyone takes a sip. Then the Lord Mastrell hands out sashes to the oldest year of acolents. Right after he did so, a group of Kershtians attacked. The mastrells should have been able to protect us, but something went wrong."

"It was horrible," Dirin whispered, his quiet voice carrying through the room. His eyes were unfocused slightly as he spoke—unfocused, and pained. "When the arrows started to fall, everyone scattered. I just stood there—I didn't know what to do. I looked toward the mastrells; a lot of us did. They were the most powerful, and so they were supposed to save us. I watched old Tendel call up sand around him, a dozen ribbons at once. But, the sand just flashed and fell dead. It happened to all of them—huge explosions of sand, followed by nothing. Then the mastrells began to die, the water sucked from their faces. It happened suddenly, incredibly fast. They didn't have time to cry out, no time to slatrify water for themselves. They just died."

Dirin fell silent.

"It must have been the water," Kenton repeated after a moment. "The water we drank—it tasted odd. There must have been something in it, something that poisoned the mastrells, and made it

so that their mastery used more water than it should have. Most mastrells can master at full power for ten minutes before being in danger of overmastery—yet they died that day after just a few seconds."

"And you think this Drile poisoned the water?" Eric asked.

"He took the bowl first," Kenton said. "And he didn't drink any of the water himself. He knew he was going to be on trial that day—my father actually took away his mastrell's sash. He must have had some deal with the Kershtians. Drile poisoned us, then they could attack and cause the mastrells to kill themselves."

"Wait a minute," Eric asked with a frown. "How big was this bowl of water? Weren't there thousands of sand masters?"

Kenton nodded. "We refilled it as it moved along."

"Then the poison would have been gone after the first round," Eric objected.

Kenton shrugged. "Maybe he only needed to poison the mastrells. There was enough confusion caused by the deaths of the most powerful that the rest of us weren't able to defend ourselves." Yet, even as Kenton spoke, he knew his arguments had holes. Sand masters beyond the mastrells had been affected too—Kenton himself had felt the poison's dehydration. The bowl had been refilled several times before it reached him.

"Anyway, Drile was definitely involved," Kenton continued. "Not only didn't he drink, but he survived."

"Ah yes," Eric said with a nod. "How could he have been so stupid as to live? Horrible mistake."

Kenton frowned—not at Eric's comment, but at something else he could hear. Voices, coming from down below. "Oh no," he groaned to himself. "What now?"

"We should gather up what food we can," Drile warned. "Tonks and carts too. We don't have much time now. The people will be mad now. Angry that our presumed leader has made them wait. There is no telling when they'll come for us. We have to be ready."

He stood in the entry hall, speaking loudly and dramatically. His voice was different than it had been the day before—he no longer tried to act as if he were in charge. Instead, he spoke with an edge of fright—one that Kenton found ridiculously contrived. Most of the other sand masters, however, didn't appear to sense its insincerity.

They stood in a large group before Drile, mumbling to themselves, their faces growing more anxious with every word Drile spoke—especially the younger ones. Some of the older, more experience sand masters regarded Drile with distrust. Unfortunately, there were men of age and wisdom left.

"You!" Drile said, pointing dramatically at Kenton.

Kenton frowned—Drile wasn't about to let him take control of the scene like he had done the day before.

"Deny it!" Drile demanded. "Deny that they only gave us two weeks to live. A death sentence!"

"Two weeks is right," Kenton responded. "But it is hardly a death sentence. The Council might dissolve the Diem, that's all."

"And what will happen after that?" Drile asked, spinning and turning back to the crowd of sand masters. His handsome face was laced with intensity. "You know they hate us," Drile continued in a low voice. "You've all heard the people speak against us, their priests preaching hatred. Without a Profession or a vote to make our voice known, the Law will no longer protect us. How long do you think it will be before the people decide that those Kershtian murderers weren't thorough enough in their slaughter? How long before the rest of the Diem joins its unfortunate mastrells?"

Even some of the older sand masters seemed to give this objection some thought.

Drile shot Kenton a look and a veiled smile. *If I can't control them*, the look said, *then I'll make certain you won't be able to either.*

Kenton cursed as the crowd grew even more nervous. He began to push his way through, working his way toward Drile. "What are you doing here, Drile?" he demanded. "Why frighten these people with senseless threats and lies?"

"We have to be ready," Drile continued. "Ready for what is to come!" Drile held out a fist. "We are stronger than they are; we always have been. They will learn what it is to defy the sand masters!"

"And when no one comes?" Kenton snapped. "Will you persuade us to make a 'preemptive strike,' to murder like the A'Kar's assassins? This talk is foolishness, Drile." Kenton finally shoved his way out of the front of the crowd, and he approached Drile with a

purposeful step. Two of Drile's sashless followers, Terr and Linai, the two most powerful living sand masters beside Drile himself, moved forward to block him, but Kenton pushed past them with a scowl.

"Drile, this is lunacy," he said in a low voice.

"You heard the Council," Drile shot back, speaking soft enough that the crowd couldn't hear. "They'll dissolve us in two weeks, no matter what you do. I'm just preparing everyone."

"By throwing them into a paranoid frenzy?" Kenton asked. "What purpose can that serve? They need order in their lives right now, something familiar."

"You, speaking of order?" Drile said with a snort. "You, who incited the acolents against the mastrells at every opportunity? You, who refused a sash four years in a row, just to spite them?" Drile smiled, nodding down at the cord he wore instead of a sash. "I'm just following your example, Lord Mastrell," he said.

Kenton groaned quietly, closing his eyes. *If only he weren't right.*

"Look, Drile," he said quietly. "You don't like me. That's all right. But we have to think of the Diem right now—let us put on an air of agreeability just long enough for the Council to rescind their decision. Then, I'll step down as Lord Mastrell. I promise. We can deal with each other later—let's save the Diem first."

"What makes you think I want to save the Diem?" Drile asked innocently. Then, in a loud voice, he continued. "Think about what I have said. I have friends in other nations, nations that aren't Lossand or Kershtian. The Rim Kingdoms will accept us with the respect we deserve, and use us as our talent demands. When the time comes, I will go, and all who wish to survive may come with me."

With that, Drile smiled to Kenton and gave a flippant bow. He left, his three attendants in tow.

Kenton watched him go, then turned to face a crowd of confused, frightened faces. Too many of them were young, younger than Kenton himself. The Kershtians must have shot for more than just sash color—they had targeted age as well, killing off the wise along with the talented. The older ones, those still alive, looked to him with questions in their faces. They were older, but their ranks

were low; they were accustomed to being told what to do.

Their need was almost too much for him. No one had ever needed him before—Kenton's worries had always been confined to himself. He wasn't accustomed to people depending on him, to looking for him for support.

They need order in their lives. His own words from before returned to him. *Something familiar*.

"What are you all looking at?" Kenton asked, trying to make his voice as light as possible. "Shouldn't you students be in classes right now?"

"Classes?" one of the acolents asked. "But, the teachers are all dead."

"I see some Diemfens and fens before me," Kenton replied. "They've been through the classes; they can teach as well as an undermastrell." Kenton searched through the crowd, picking out likely subjects. "Mlaidon and Derr, you take the first year acolents. The students will be able to tell you where in their lessons they were."

The group of sand masters looked at one another with trepidation. However, Kenton continued to talk, calling off names and giving assignments. Slowly, the confused sand masters let themselves be organized back into classes. As they did so, Kenton saw some of the paranoia Drile had fostered begin to dissolve—the Diem had been through so much chaos during the last few weeks, its members were glad for any reminder of the way things had once been.

"I never thought I would see you organizing classes… or organizing anything, for that matter," Eric mumbled, swaggering over as Kenton directed groups of sand masters, sending some to teach, others to clean, and others to help Dirin look for ladders.

"People change," Kenton said with a shrug.

"That they do," Eric admitted, watching sand masters scuttle around. "Dirin's been filling me in. It looks like you have quite the fight ahead of you."

"Drile's apocalyptic words were out of place," Kenton said, turning away from the sand masters for a moment, "but he was right about one thing. These two weeks were given out of spite, not out of patience. The Diem doesn't have much of a chance."

“Just the kind of odds you like, mastrell,” Eric noted, emphasizing the title. “I thought old Praxton would die before he gave you a sash.”

“He just about did,” Kenton noted.

Eric paused, then he chuckled lightly. “Well, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll stay around. I have a feeling these next two weeks are going to be very interesting.”

Kenton smiled. Eric was different, but the soul of his friend—the earnest boy that always tried to make everything come out all right for everyone—was still there. “There is no one I would rather have on my side than you, old friend.”

Eric smiled ruefully. “You never know. You yourself said that people change. You may realize you find me annoying.”

“I already realized that,” Kenton said with a laugh.

“Well, if you’re certain, then I’ll have to graciously accept your offer.”

Kenton smiled—then he paused. “Wait a minute. You were asking me if you could stay. How did that turn into a ‘gracious acceptance’ on your part?”

Eric winked with a smile. Then he turned to Dirin. “Now, where’s this breakfast you mentioned?”

Khriss made it all the way to the end of the shadowed alleyway outside of Lonzare before the light grew too much for her. She stepped directly out into the sunlight, getting a brief glimpse of people passing on the street, before she closed her watering, pained eyes. With a sigh she put on the dark glasses.

“How do you stand it?” she asked as Baon joined her on the street.

“It doesn’t even really bother me anymore,” he replied, scanning the street. “It hurts for the first little while, but your eyes adjust. You could do it if you really tried.”

“Maybe next time,” Khriss mumbled/

“You people are strange,” N’Teese said.

“So you’ve mentioned,” Khriss replied. The phrase was quickly becoming one of the girl’s favorites.

N’Teese shrugged.

“All right. Where are we going today, duchess?” Baon asked.

Khriss paused, looking over the street. Khriss had chosen to wear

one of the dayside robes Acron had purchased for her. She liked it much more than the ones she had bought earlier—it was obviously meant to be tied at the waist, and it wasn't so thick. Over all, it was much more comfortable.

"Well, we tried the three most powerful," Khriss mused. "I guess we'll have to visit one of the less-influential Taisha, and hope they know something or can get us into see someone more important."

"You're not tired of being rejected yet?" N'Teese asked with a sigh.

"You just do as your told," Khriss told the girl. She was beginning to doubt that there was a single person on dayside who understood the concept of respect.

N'Teese groaned quietly, but she didn't object again. "All right, which one this time?"

"Who is left?" Khriss asked.

"Well, there's the Lord Admiral. He'd probably see you, but I can guarantee he won't be sober at the time, so he probably won't be of much help. The Lord Artisan is kind of powerful, but he's also really busy. He has dozens of smaller groups in his profession that demand a lot of his time. The Lord Mason doesn't live in the city—he just appoints an emissary for each Council to vote for him. That only leaves the Lord Farmer. I guess we could go see him."

"Farmer?" Khriss said with a frown. That didn't sound very impressive. "What about that other group, the one you mentioned yesterday. The Mastrens?"

"Mastrells," N'Teese corrected. "Well, I suppose we could visit them. I don't know how much help they would be—apparently they've got a new Lord Mastrell, and I don't think he's going to be around very long…"

Khriss frowned, looking over at Baon.

The warrior shrugged. "Sometimes new leaders are more flexible than old ones," he offered.

Khriss nodded. "We'll go see these mastrells, then."

N'Teese shrugged, and then dashed into the crowd with her characteristic vigor. After a day of using the girl as a guide, Khriss still had a difficult time keeping track of N'Teese. She just had to move in the direction she had seen the daysider go, and hope that N'Teese would reappear often enough to keep them from getting

lost.

They moved toward the dock area of Kezare, and once again Khriss was glad for Baon's presence. His deep black skin and powerful build was enough to clear them a path through the crowds. N'Teese found them a boat—apparently these mastrells lived outside of the city—and Khriss gratefully left the press of people behind to climb onto the quiet vessel.

As they rowed, Khriss was left wondering what kind of situation she was getting herself into. N'Teese seemed apprehensive for some reason, and she had implied that these mastrells were some sort of religious figures. So far, the only religion she had seen on dayside was that of the Kershtians. Cynder and Acron were still arguing whether their worship of a 'Sand Lord,' an incarnation of the sun, was monotheism or animism. If these mastrells were religious figures as well, that probably meant they were opposed to the Kershtians. What kind of people could compete with a group that made up such a large part of dayside's population? Would she find some kind of cult, clouded in secrecy? N'Teese's reaction to them seemed to imply something like that—she was frightened of them. Perhaps they would turn out to be some sort of racial supremacists. That would explain why N'Teese disliked them—she obviously had some Kershtian blood in her.

Eventually they reached the other side and N'Teese led them down a well-traveled road. Their destination was obvious—a large stone structure that dominated the mostly-flat landscape. It was bigger than any Khriss had seen on dayside, a blockish monstrosity of a building that looked more like a prison or a fortress than a dwelling. Her apprehension grew as they got closer—visiting a farmer was looking more and more appealing.

"Here we are," N'Teese said, pausing on the road. She was uncharacteristically subdued. "I've never actually been inside before."

Khriss quite nearly turned back. Her curiosity, however, wouldn't let her. She knew that if she didn't go in now, she'd be left wondering about the place so much that she wouldn't be able to sleep for days.

"All right," she said, striding forward. "Let's go."

N'Teese followed, as did Baon, who, as usual, wore an open-

fronted dayside robe with one of his tight cotton shirts and sturdy trousers underneath. His hand stayed noticeably close to his side, where one of the pistols lay hidden in a trouser pocket.

Even Khriss could tell that, despite its imposing air, the building wouldn't make much of a fortress. For one thing, it didn't have any doors. The front had a large gate-like opening, but there was no way to close it off. There weren't any guards either. They were able to climb up the front steps and enter without seeing a soul.

Inside was a lavish-looking hall with tapestries and murals. Oddly, the floor was covered with a few inches of sand. There was too much for it to have blown in—it had been placed intentionally. Though there were numerous footprints in the sand, no one was in the hall either.

"There," Baon whispered, pointing straight ahead. The room's back wall had a passage in it, and on the other side Khriss could see daylight. Either the building was ridiculously thin, or it had a courtyard in the middle. There were voices echoing through the hallway.

Khriss took a deep breath and apprehensively began to walk forward. In the courtyard, a crowd of people stood talking, mostly in small groups. Some rushed toward other parts of the courtyard, where different groups stood, and others seemed to be arguing about something. Khriss frowned. They all wore robes, which was common enough on dayside. The robes, however, weren't tan or gray like most she had seen—they were bright white. She'd only seen one robe bleached so colorless.

"That's him," N'Teese said, nodding.

Khriss followed the gesture. There, standing in an authoritarian manner as he directed the movement of the different groups, was a man of average dayside height. He had his back to her, but there was something familiar about him. Then, someone moved, and she noticed the golden sash tied around his waist. At that moment, he turned absently, and Khriss got her first look at his face.

Khriss nearly fainted in shock. Fortunately, she was too angry to pass out.

"You!" she screamed, feeling herself grow red with rage. She sputtered for a moment, unable to force any words out, so she finally just said "You!" again.

Kenton looked up with surprise. His eyes widened slightly for a moment, then he smiled. “Hello, Khrissalla,” he said in accented Dynastic. “How have you been?”

“I… You… Shella!” she finally snapped. “You lied to me!”

“Well, you didn’t ever actually ask me if I was a sand master,” he said with a shrug.

Khriss ignored the comment. “How dare you!” she said, stalking forward. A few younger men with white robes wisely moved out of her way as she approached. “After I saved your life! After I let you travel in my presence! You… liar!”

Kenton sighed, reaching into his robe for something. “I don’t have time for this,” he mumbled, pulling out what appeared to be nothing more than a handful of sand.

Suddenly, the sand flashed brightly—like silent gunpowder. Khriss, who had nearly reached the scoundrel, jumped in surprise, yelping quietly. She froze, amazed, as the sand rose out of Kenton’s hand, moving of its own volition. It bent in the air, snapping down to the ground. Two more snakes of glowing sand rose from the sand below, gathering around Kenton’s feet. Then suddenly Kenton launched into the air, a trail of brilliant grains streaming below him.

Khriss’s jaw drooped as she watched, stupefied. Kenton soared through the air to land on a third-floor balcony.

“That’s…” Khriss mumbled

“It’s sand mastery,” N’Teese said with a frown. “Why are you so surprised?”

Khriss shook her head, still disbelieving. “How did he do that?” she asked. “Wires?”

“I don’t think so,” Baon said, apparently still a little tense. “It looks like we found your sand mages, duchess. I guess that is what our friend was hiding from us while we crossed the desert.”

Her mind refused to accept such a ridiculous notion. There was, however, one thing she was certain of. Kenton had lied to her. Her earlier anger began to return, and she turned sharply, looking over the courtyard. A couple hundred white-robed forms stared back at her. Khriss ignored them as she found what she was looking for—a couple men were placing some ladders along the closest wall—the one Kenton had chosen to fly up. One of the ladders led to the

second floor, and a second hung between a second floor balcony and one on the third floor.

"Come on!" she snapped, stalking toward the ladders. Baon followed with a look that almost seemed to be amusement.

She moved past the confused workmen, pushing them aside and climbing up their ladders. She got about halfway up before looking down and realizing her stupidity. The dayside wind was blowing through the courtyard, threatening to topple her off the ladder. She began to feel disoriented before she noticed something. The wind was whipping her robe flagrantly, and while Baon stood holding the ladder with respectfully downturned eyes, the two men below were staring directly up at her.

Khriss blushed furiously. "Tell them to look away!" she demanded of N'Teese. The indignation was just enough to motivate her to keep moving. She reached the second floor balcony safely, though her heart was fluttering faster than her robe. Baon arrived at the top of the latter a moment later.

"The girl says to tell you that you're crazy, and there is no way she's climbing that latter."

"Fine," Khriss snapped, eyeing the second latter. It had been tied directly to the balcony's banister—it looked stable, but…

Baon stepped forward, climbing on the latter to test its weight then hoisting himself up the rungs to the third floor. *Well, you can't back down now,* she thought with a sigh. Trying to remember just how angry she was with Kenton, and trying to forget what the wind might show those below, she stepped onto the latter and began to climb. She kept going, rung after rung, not looking down, until Baon reached down and grabbed her under the arms and easily lifted her onto the third floor balcony.

Khriss closed her eyes, breathing deeply for a moment. Then, she carefully stoked her fury back up to its former inferno. "How dare he lie to a royal duchess of Elis!" she declared, and stalked into the room beyond. The door was open, and she entered an inner hallway, counting down three doors—the number of balconies between the one she had taken and the one Kenton had landed on. She needn't have counted—Kenton stood leaning against the doorway of the third room.

"Now, Khrissalla, you really should calm yourself," he warned.

She continued to march froward, staring directly at him.

“Um, Khriss?” he said, growing a little bit nervous.

She didn’t stop. She even added a slight growl of anger for effect.

“We’ll talk when you’re feeling better,” he mumbled, ducking inside and slamming the door.

“Baon!” she ordered. “Break it down!”

Baon raised an eyebrow, then reached forward and turned the knob, pushing the door open.

Khriss blushed for a moment then stalked into the room.

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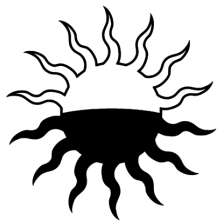

When he heard the door open, Kenton rolled his eyes with a sigh of exasperation. He reached into his sand barrel, preparing to leap off the balcony and retreat to the courtyard below.

"Wait!" Khriss demanded. "We need to talk."

Kenton relaxed, lowering his sand. Perhaps she was finally calming down.

Khriss stalked through the room until she was standing on the balcony directly in front of him, whereupon she proceeded to slap him soundly.

"Ouch!" Kenton said, dropping his sand and reaching up to massage his cheek. "That's talking?"

"You're a sand mage!" Khriss accused, ignoring his protest.

"There's that word again," Kenton said, leaning back against the banister. His cheek still hurt. "What is a mage, anyway?"

Khriss fumed for a moment, then folded her arms. Kenton couldn't help noticing that she had found some new clothing. Her deep red robe was cut like a man's—it was the kind a rich merchant would wear to a formal occasion, a robe meant to be used indoors, rather than withstand the heat. Not only was it scandalously thin, but once again she had pulled it tightly around her waist and tied with a man's sash. The combination of thin material, form-accentuating sash, and low neckline was very distracting.

Finally, Khriss spoke. “A mage is the same thing as a wizard, or a sorcerer,” she informed. “Someone with mystical power.”

Kenton frowned. “I’m nothing of the sort,” he replied. “I am a sand master. Wizards and magicians are for the superstitious—charlatans that prey upon the foolish.”

Khriss snorted. “I’m not certain what kind of tricks you use, but…”

She trailed off as Kenton called his sand to life, sending a ribbon over to fetch his *qido*, which sat on a cupboard nearby. He brought the *qido* to himself and squirted some of its water on his hand, then rubbed it on his still-aching cheek. Then he picked the *qido* back up with his ribbon, and swung it in Khriss’s direction.

“Thirsty?” he asked nonchalantly.

The darksider stared at the bottle with amazed eyes. She walked around the bottle, studying the glowing ribbon that held it. The ribbon’s front clutched the bottle and its tail extended back to Kenton’s hand. She poked the bottle, bent down to look up at it, and eventually waved her hand overhead.

“Where is the string?” she demanded.

“What string?” Kenton asked with amusement. She had apparently forgotten her anger now that her curiosity had been engaged.

“The string you’re using to hold it up,” she mumbled without much conviction. She studied the ceiling for a moment, growing increasingly pale in the face. Finally, she turned around and walked to one of the chairs in the center of the room. “I need to sit down,” she mumbled.

Kenton shot a look at Baon, who had taken up position at the room’s door, his face unreadable. Kenton could tell from the warrior’s posture, however, that he was very interested in what was happening.

Khriss sat down, wiggling in her seat uncomfortably. “Cushions filled with sand?” she asked with a frown. “What is wrong with you people?”

“What?” Kenton asked, settling into one of the chairs. He commanded his sand to place the *qido* on a nearby table, then wound his ribbon back across the room to hover in front of Khriss’s chair. She shied away from the sand slightly, then reached forward

to poke at it with an apprehensive finger. Eventually, she realized it wouldn't hurt her, and instead began to wave her hand through the middle of the ribbon, slapping free grains of sand that immediately fell dead as soon as they left the stream.

"Please don't do that," Kenton said, struggling to keep control of the ribbon. "It's very distracting."

"Sorry," Khriss said, pulling her hand back. Then, mumbling to herself, she continued. "It really exists. Gevin was right—dayside magic is real."

"I keep telling you, Khrissalla," Kenton interjected. "It isn't magic—it's sand mastery."

She stared at the sand thoughtfully for a moment, then turned accusing eyes back on Kenton. "You still lied to us," she insisted coldly. "You told us you weren't anyone important—but apparently you're one of these Taisha."

"I've only had the job for a day, now, Khriss," he replied. "Back when you found me, I wasn't anyone important."

"One day?" she asked. "Why you?"

Kenton sighed. "It's complicated. Let's just say I'm the only one left who could take the job. So, I'm Lord Mastrell. For a little while, at least…"

Khriss folded her arms, tapping her foot in thought. "You have to help me," she finally demanded.

"I do?" Kenton asked.

"Yes," Khriss continued. "I saved your life. When you save someone's life in a primitive culture, they are honor-bound to follow you until they save your life in return. I've read about it dozens of times."

Kenton chuckled. "I hadn't heard about that requirement. Besides, I saved your life too. Remember—I found you water when you were all about to die. I also found you to a town where you could get food, then led you all the way to Kezare. I think we're about even."

Khriss frowned. "I don't suppose you know anything about the whereabouts of Prince Gevalden?"

"Your betrothed?" Kenton asked. "No. I hadn't heard of him until you mentioned his name."

Khriss sighed, standing up. "I need to think about this," she

mumbled. She shot Kenton one last look—he couldn't decide if it was accusatory, angry, or curious—before stalking toward the door.

Before she arrived, however, a puffing Eric stumbled into the room. "Kenton," he said between breaths, "those ladders are definitely not going to work. You're a good friend, but I really don't feel like risking my life every time I decide to have lunch with you."

Kenton nodded. "I'll tell Dirin to work on it."

Eric leaned against the wall, then turned to Khriss and nodded. "Hello again," he said in Dynastic.

"Again?" she asked, examining Eric's darkside clothing.

"He was one of the sailors on the ship that brought us to dayside," Baon informed.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

Baon nodded.

Khriss sighed. "This is too weird," she mumbled, walking past Eric and leaving the room. Baon quietly shut the door behind them.

Eric watched her go, then shook his head, letting his back slide down the wall until he was seated. "Kenton, I forbid you to leave this room for at least an hour. I about killed myself climbing up here—I want to feel some vindication that my near-suicide was worth the effort."

Kenton smiled, shaking his head as he tried to make sense of what Khriss had said. She hadn't believed in her 'sand mages' but she had come looking for them? Why search for something you think is fakery? And what did her betrothed have to do with it all? Kenton certainly hoped this Prince Gevalden knew what he was getting himself into.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the door opening yet again. A somewhat sheepish, but still annoyed, Khriss stalked back into the room. "The ladder's broken!" she informed.

"Oh, sorry about that," Eric mumbled.

"Well, how do we get down?" Khriss asked. "There have to be some stairs somewhere."

"I'm afraid not," Kenton replied.

"But, how do people get up here?" she asked.

Kenton reached over and picked up a handful of sand.

"You mean…" Khriss said, suddenly apprehensive.

Kenton nodded. "Now, don't tell me you aren't curious to

experience sand mastery first hand?”

“I don’t… I mean, not…” she trailed off as Kenton called his sand to life, her eyes transfixed by the shimmering colors and shifting grains.

Kenton rose, stepping toward the balcony hand holding out his hand toward Khriss. “Are you coming?” he asked.

Khriss regarded him with suspicious eyes. “Do I have to?” she asked.

Kenton shrugged. “No, I suppose we could send food up to you once in a while.”

Khriss sighed, stepping forward and taking his hand, watching apprehensively as the sand whirled around his feet. She still had trouble believing that what he was doing wasn’t a trick of some kind. Unfortunately, she couldn’t come up with any possible way he could be faking. She had felt the grains of sand, she knew they were real. Somehow Kenton could make them move. It shouldn’t be possible, of course, but…

Kenton walked to the side of the balcony where the banister was cut away, and stepped off into the air. Still holding Khriss by the hand, he gestured for her to join him. Heart pounding, Khriss did as directed, allowing him to pull her out into his arms. As soon as she left the safety of the balcony, she grabbed Kenton with tense arms, holding close to his body. They slowly began to descend through the air, Khriss holding to him as tightly as she could, trying not to think about the fact that she was trusting her life to a force that shouldn’t exist.

They reached the ground with a smooth motion, and Khriss released a breath she hadn’t realized she had been holding. She breathed deeply, thinking about what had just happened. There was no denying it now—the sand mages, or sand masters as Kenton called them, did exist. She had been wrong all this time. Gevin’s mission hadn’t been without purpose—his willingness to dream had proven more valid than her logic.

Khriss opened her eyes, and only then did she realize that her arms were still wrapped around Kenton. With a start of surprise, she let go of him, stepping back and straightening her robe. The daysider didn’t pay her much heed—his face was focused and his hand raised in front of him as he guided a floating Baon down off

the balcony, holding the warrior in a grip of shimmering sand. The warrior was watching the process with interested eyes.

"Wait a minute!" Khriss realized as Kenton set Baon on the ground. "You could have just dropped me by myself—you didn't need to carry me!"

Kenton smiled. "I thought it would be more fun this way."

So Khriss slapped him again, this time on the other cheek.

"Ouch!" he complained.

"Baon, we're leaving!" Khriss informed. "This time I mean it." With that, she stalked away from Kenton and his sand masters, grabbing N'Teese by the collar of her robe as she passed. She checked over her shoulder to make certain Baon was following and proceeded on out the hallway.

"I can't believe it," she muttered. "All this time… Kenton!"

"We should have been able to figure it out," Baon noted, catching up to her.

"How?" Khriss demanded. "There's nothing remarkable about him—he didn't strike me as anyone important."

Baon shook his head. "Someday, duchess, you will need to learn how to judge people, and not faces or titles."

Khriss frowned. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Baon just shrugged.

Khriss sighed—she wasn't in any mood to deal with him at the moment. "Come on," she said, stalking from the Diem.

Kenton watcher Khriss go, still rubbing his cheek. He didn't know why he continued to bait her; as if she didn't hate him enough already. Of course, she deserved it for stalking into his home and calling him a liar, presuming to make demands. What did he owe her? He was the one that had been forced to put up with her non-stop questions during the ride back to Lossand. Compared to that experience, death was almost preferable.

"Hey! Hello! Sand boy, you've got a childhood friend trapped on the balcony up here! Aren't you going to bring me down too?"

Kenton turned to look up at Eric, who was making waving motions atop Kenton's balcony.

"Never mind, I'm coming back up!" Kenton called, reaching for his sand pouch. He paused, however. Powerful sand masters didn't need to be touching sand to call it to life. It was one of the abilities

Kenton had always wished he possessed.

Reaching out his hand, he focused on the sand on the ground in front of him, commanding it to come to him. He could feel its energy. It wanted to obey, to release its power in a flash of magnificent sand mastery. But it resisted at the same time. There was a barrier—a barrier of power Kenton could not provide. He struggled, feeling it almost come to life, but in the end he still couldn't make it move. He sighed, lowering his hand. He had improved in strength, but three ribbons was still relatively weak in the hierarchy of sand mastery.

Well, I should be thankful for what I have. The sands only know where I even got the ability to control three ribbons, Kenton thought, reaching for his sand pouch to retrieve a handful. He had barely called it to life, however, before several calls of surprise sounded from behind him. *She's back again?* he thought with amusement. However, when he turned, he found a form approaching that was definitely not Khriss.

He wore the black cape of a senior trackt, and it matched his dark uniform. *Why would a trackt come here?* Kenton thought with confusion. The only time he had seen trackts in the Diem was when… they wanted to ask the Lord Mastrell's permission to arrest a sand master. *Oh, sands…* Kenton thought with despair. *What has Drile done this time?*

Kenton watched with apprehension as the trackt approached. As he did so, Kenton frowned. The man was Kershtian—not only did he have the dark skin and twin braids, but he prominently wore a *DaiKeen* symbol on his forehead. There was only one person this man could be.

"Senior trackt Ais," Kenton said, nodding as the man stopped in front of him.

The trackt bowed formally. "You have heard of me, My Lord?"

"I don't think there is a person in Kezare who hasn't," Kenton replied slowly, trying to decide what to do if Ais demanded he let one of the sand masters be arrested.

"I have been sent on a mission from the Lady Judge," Ais said with a hard voice. He was formal and stiff—too much so, even for a trackt. He didn't want to be here. Of course, Kenton could have guessed as much. Ais had just walked into a place his people

considered the most unholy on all of dayside.

"She fears for your safety, Lord Mastrell," Ais informed. "I have been sent to protect you."

Kenton frowned in surprise. "What?" he asked.

"Part of a trackt's duty is to provide protection for those in danger. The other mastrells were recently assassinated. The same might happen to you."

What was Heelis thinking? Kenton didn't need protection, especially not from a Kershtian. "Tell the Lady Judge that I appreciate her concern," Kenton said slowly, "but that I am confident of my ability to take care of myself."

"The Lady Judge insists," Ais informed with harsh, demanding eyes.

Kenton snorted. "You're a spy, then?"

The man did not respond. His eyes, however, did flicker toward the mastered sand glowing in Kenton's hand, and the edges of his mouth turned down in displeasure.

You don't approve of me, Kenton thought, staring back into the man's cold irises. *Heelis not only sends me a spy, she picks the single most antagonistic trackt she can find.* Ais met his gaze; the man's eyes were strong, arrogant. Authoritative.

"Fine," Kenton snapped, old reflexes kicking in. "Follow me if you wish—or, rather, if you can." With that, he lifted himself into the air on his sand, leaving the trackt standing behind in the courtyard. Kenton soared over to his balcony—he was growing quite proficient at propelling himself with sand—to land beside Eric.

"Who's that?" Eric asked, nodding toward the trackt, who still stood stiffly below.

"No one of importance," Kenton snapped. Then he paused. Part of him wanted to go stride into his quarters and forget about the intolerant Kershtian. Another piece, however, remembered what had happened just a day before, when Kenton had been talking to Drile. The former mastrell had said something very similar to what Kenton had just said to the trackt, and had jumped into the air, landing on this very balcony. Leaving Kenton behind on the sand, presumably to feel inferior.

Kenton sighed, bowing his head. *We are the same, Drile and I,*

he thought, shaking his head. *Like he said this morning; he's only following my example…*

An example I will no longer give, Kenton thought with determination. He turned around, jumping off the balcony to leave a startled Eric behind.

Kenton thumped to the ground beside the trackt, who had turned and was preparing to leave.

"I apologize for my rudeness, senior," Kenton said. "It has been a difficult few days for me."

Ais turned, a flicker of surprise glinting in his eyes.

"I will lift you up to the balcony, if you wish," Kenton offered.

"I must refuse," Ais replied. His voice was only lightly accented—he had probably grown up in Lossand. "I would sooner die then let your sand touch my skin."

"I see," Kenton said. "Then, there are several ladders leaning against the wall over there. You may use them at your discretion. You will forgive me if I have matters that need attention."

Ais nodded stiffly.

Kenton sighed, lifting himself into the air once again. He wasn't certain if he had done any good, but at least he had tried.

"Stop it," Eric ordered. "You're making me dizzy."

Kenton paused. He had spent the last hour trying to figure out how to solve the Diem's problems. He had considered the Taisha, their separate motivations, and the history of sand mastery. He had digested Lossand's political situation, the influence of the rich *kelzi* landowners, and the religious power of the *Ker'Reen* church. And, like it sometimes did, his consternation had manifest itself in pacing—pacing that Eric apparently found distracting.

"You don't have to watch," Kenton accused.

"If I had anything better to do, I wouldn't," Eric shot back, lounging in one of the room's chairs.

Kenton ignored him, and resumed his pacing. If only he had more time. Two weeks was hardly time enough to convince himself the Diem could survive, let alone convince its enemies.

"You know, walking around your room in a circle probably isn't going to get much done," Eric observed.

Kenton sighed. "I know," he said, gesturing with his hand. A hovering ribbon of sand, glowing almost unnoticed at his side,

mimicked the movement. “I’m just going to have to visit the Taisha and try and talk them into voting for me.”

Eric shrugged. “You always were good at arguments,” he noted.

“Good at arguing,” Kenton corrected. “Unfortunately, I’m poor at actually convincing anyone. I rarely won any battles, I just made a lot of noise fighting them.”

“True. Last I checked, the Taishin were all the same when I left —um, present company excluded, of course. So, who’s first?”

“I’m still deciding,” Kenton explained. “If I can get some of the Taisha on my side, then others will be easier to convince.”

“Like the Lady Judge?”

Kenton shook his head. “Talking won’t do any good with Heelis. She’s already told me what I need to do to get her vote.”

“Which is?”

“Pay of the Diem’s debts and unify the sand masters underneath me.”

Eric raised an eyebrow. “Debts?” he asked.

Kenton nodded, sending a ribbon of sand into the smaller room with the bookshelf. It returned baring a bound ledger. “I found this last night. Open it to the last page.”

Eric obliged. He read the figures for a moment, then snorted. “You have to be joking,” he replied.

Kenton shook his head. “Those reports came from the Lord Merchant. I think my father kept them as a kind of trophy, proof of the Diem’s ability to ignore conventional law.”

“But, this says you owe over seven hundred thousand Lak!” Eric exclaimed. “Kenton, I don’t think that many coins even exist! You’d have to hollow out the entire Talloner mountain range to get that kind of money.”

“I know,” Kenton responded sickly.

“Okay…” Eric said. “Let’s forget the Lady Judge for now.”

“And move on to whom?” Kenton asked. “Vey? He has been the Diem’s political enemy for decades, and on top of that he’s Kershtian. His people would probably assassinate him if he voted in favor of the Diem.”

“True,” Eric agreed. “Of course, then there’s my father. He’s always respected the sand masters.”

Kenton shook his head. “He respected Praxton, not the sand

masters."

Eric frowned, cocking his head to the side. "I suppose you're right," he admitted. "He did often refer to you people as a waste of resources."

"He said as much yesterday," Kenton said, still pacing. "Plus, I think he blames me for your disappearance."

"Really?" Eric asked with interest. "I didn't know that."

Kenton snorted. "That's because you ran away. All Reegent knows is that he once had a dutiful, rule-keeping son with a scoundrel as a best friend. Who else would he blame when you rebelled?"

"I guess that makes sense," Eric admitted. "Well, at least you can always count on old Delious—I assume the old sot is still Lord Admiral."

"The Helm's greatest embarrassment, as always," Kenton said with a nod. "Yes, he'll probably vote for me. However, if he does, it will mean that I've lost. Delious always votes the opposite of Vey. Which means, by the way, if by some miracle I do bring the Lord Merchant onto my side, Delious will spoil it by automatically turning against me."

Eric chuckled at that one. "Maybe we should just run off to darkside. I've found that avoiding one's problems isn't as difficult as the philosophers would have one believe."

"I'm tempted," Kenton mumbled.

Eric snorted. "You would never do that," he said. "Many things have changed, old friend, but I can tell one thing is still the same. You can't resist a good fight."

Kenton stopped his pacing, smiling slightly. "I suppose you're right. Well, like you said, pacing isn't getting me anywhere."

Eric rose, stretching. "You've decided then?"

Kenton nodded. "The Lord Admiral has been my ally in the past, even if his vote was only circumstantial. That's better than I've gotten from anyone else."

"Ah, good," Eric said, following Kenton to the balcony. "I was hoping you would pick him. I could use something to drink."

"Red."

Delious proffered his arm, grabbing the cup lazily. He leaned forward on his mansion's balcony, looking at the city of Kezare

below him as he slurped the wine down with one monstrous gulp, inhaling the liquid like other men breathe. Then, smacking his lips, brought the cup up for inspection.

The goblet of sparkling crystal had been sculpted by one of Kezare's most prominent Kershtian craftsmen. Its etchings depicted a scene of deep sandlings from the *Ker'Reen* mythologies. The detail was exquisite. Each chink in the carapace was visible and the Sand Lord's face—shining high in the sky—was so lifelike in its crystalline tinyness that it almost seemed like a living being. The artisan had etched his very soul into this piece.

"How disappointing," Delious mumbled. "It's just like all the other ones." He sighed and dropped the priceless wonder over the side of his balcony. It made a satisfyingly delicate crash as it smashed on the stone street below.

"It was part of a set, Lord Delious," his wine steward supplied from behind. "Usually when one buys a set of cups, they come with similar designs on them."

"Well, next time buy a dozen sets and throw away all but one of the cups," he ordered.

"Yes, Lord Taisha."

"White," Delious ordered, holding out his hand to receive another cup. He sipped at it for a moment, then wrinkled his nose in annoyance. "Don't they make wine more expensive than this?" he complained.

"No, Lord Delious, this is the best."

Delious sighed again, dropping another cup off the balcony "Well, mix the red and the white this time. Let's see what that tastes like."

His steward complied, handing Delious yet another crystalline cup. Delious drank the wine, decided it didn't taste very good, drank the rest anyway, then dropped the cup—this time flicking it out of his hand to send it spinning toward the street below. It refracted the sun's light beautifully before smashing to its death.

"Um, Lord Admiral?" a voice asked from behind.

Delious turned inquisitively, reaching out for another cup of wine in the process. Behind him stood several men in fine *shalrim* robes. Both were Lossandin, and both had looks of barely-veiled loathing on their faces. Technically, they were members of the

Helm, Profession of sailors, though Delious doubted they knew the bow of a ship from their own afts. They were *kelzin*, members of the Shipowner's Circle.

"Are you still here?" Delious asked distractedly.

"We haven't had our audience yet, Lord Admiral," the taller of the two—Jalees—answered. "We've been waiting for you to finish… whatever it was you were doing."

"Oh, right," Delious mumbled, sipping at his wine. "Well, what did you want?"

"I brought you a gift, Lord Taisha, from the Circle," Jalees said, nodding toward a carapace box at his side. "A case of detha, a drink favored in the south."

Delious frowned. "I've had it before. It didn't seem to have much kick to me."

"It… isn't alcoholic, Lord Admiral," Jalees informed.

"Ah, that's probably why I didn't like it," Delious replied. "Steward!"

"Yes, My Lord," the small, balding man replied.

"Do you like detha?"

"It is quite delicious, My Lord," the wine steward replied.

Delious rubbed his chin, then took another sip of wine. "Glad you like it. Take that case home and give it to your family. A gift from your Lord Taisha."

"My thanks, Lord Delious," the steward replied.

Jalees grew red in the face, a color heightened by his bright yellow robes.

"Thank you for the gift… what was your name again?"

"Jalees, My Lord," the man said, barely able to keep the annoyance out of his voice. Delious made certain to ask that question at least once every time the man visited.

"Good day then, Jeelas," Delious said, turning to lean back out of his balcony. "Steward, the scenery outside my window is looking rather drab. Do you suppose we could knock down a few buildings to make it more picturesque?"

"Perhaps, My Lord."

Jalees cleared his voice from behind. "My Lord," he began.

"You're still here?" Delious asked with surprise, turning again.

"Um, yes My Lord," Jalees said. "The real purpose of my visit

has to do with a request from the Circle."

"I recommend Lraezare's eldenvel vintage," Delious said.

"My Lord?" Jalees asked in confusion.

"Your request," Delious explained. "Weren't you going to ask me what vintage to have at your Circle meeting this week?"

"Um, no, My Lord."

"Well why are you bothering me then?" Delious said, shaking his head in exasperation as he turned back to the balcony once again.

"We were hoping, My Lord," Jalees said bravely, "that we could convince you to curb your drinking."

"Curb my drinking?" Delious asked in amazement. "Why, how would I spend my time?"

"There are many things you could try, My Lord. Balls, plays, boat races…"

"No, I find them all boring," Delious declared. "I shall face this world drunk, or I shan't face it at all. Thank you for the suggestion, but since I judge it to be inane, I shall have to ignore it. Good day."

Delious didn't need to turn around to imagine the look of enraged frustration on Jalees's bearded face. Finally, he heard the man turn and walk out the door, his footsteps angry. Delious chuckled softly to himself, waving at some people crossing on the street below and then warning them to avoid the broken glass.

"What a delightful day," Delious announced. "The only thing wrong is that I am by no means drunk enough. Steward, open another bottle."

Kenton and Eric passed a pair of angry-looking *kelzin* as they walked up the steps to the Lord Admiral's mansion. The two men, both Lossandin and both wearing expensive robes, brushed past Kenton, mumbling quietly to one another.

Kenton paused, turning to watch them go.

Eric snorted. "You shouldn't have let them get away with that."

"With what?" Kenton asked.

"With treating you that way," Eric explained. "They should have bowed—you're not only a mastrell, but a Lord Taisha."

Kenton shrugged. "I don't even think they realized who I was. They looked… preoccupied."

"You mean infuriated," Eric corrected.

“I suppose they have a right to be angry,” Kenton said. “They were probably members of the Helm. The mere mention of the Lord Admiral is usually enough to embarrass Helm members—I can’t imagine what it must be like to visit him.”

Eric shrugged. “I don’t know. I always kind of liked the man.”

Kenton turned with a frown. “You always said you found him disgraceful.”

“My father found him disgraceful,” Eric corrected. “And so, therefore, did I—or, at least, that is what I said. It isn’t wise to disagree with the Lord General, especially if you happen to be his heir. On the inside, however, I thought Delious delightful. If my father didn’t invite him to a party, the Lord Admiral would act offended, and complain loudly that the Lord General was slighting the Helm. And, when my father gave in and invited him, Delious would drink all of the wine, complain about its vintage, and then collapse on the floor.”

“Yes,” Kenton said wryly, “delightful is exactly the word I would have chosen.”

“I always found it amusing that the sand’s only true idiot was also the one person my father could never get the best of.”

“Well, that idiot is one of the people who stands between the Diem and destruction. Let us hope he refrains from passing out until he’s cast his vote in my favor.” Kenton turned, looking up at the mansion in front of them. It was large, wide as opposed to tall, and its front had obviously been carved by some of Lossand’s most skilled stonemasons. It actually had reliefs etched into its face, as well as pillars and a few fanciful statues of deep sandlings.

Of course, the beautiful home didn’t stand out when it was surrounded by so many like it. Here, on the smaller island that formed the *kelzi* district of Kezare, the wealthy spent a great deal of resources proving just how rich they were. As soon as one crossed the *KelThrain*, the bridge that spanned the short distance between Kezare proper and the *kelzi* district, one stepped into a different world. The clustered buildings and narrow streets gave way to solitary mansions with statue gardens and yards filled with rare, often beautiful, sandlings. Here Vey and his merchants kept careful control of the real estate, making certain that only those rich enough—and prestigious enough—were allowed to purchase land.

Of course, they would probably have tried to get rid of the Lord Admiral if they could have found a way.

"Come on," Kenton said, turning to climb the rest of the steps. Then he paused, turning around. "Are you coming?" he asked, not of Eric, but of the other man standing at the bottom of the steps.

The black-uniformed trackt looked up with suspicious eyes.

"You're not going to make a very efficient spy if you don't stay close to me," Kenton warned.

The Kershtian's look didn't change, but he did begin to follow, walking with a swift—but stiff—step. Kenton had found the man waiting in the Diem's courtyard when he came down from his third-floor rooms. Ais hadn't said a word, but had fallen into step, following Kenton like a very formal shadow.

When Ais arrived Kenton continued on, ignoring the frown on Eric's face. They walked through the cavern-like pillared entryway and rapped the door knocker. A few moments later a short, baling man with slicked-back hair answered the door.

"The Lord Mastrell," Kenton said formally, "to visit his colleague the Lord Admiral."

The man's eyes opened wide in surprise. "I'll… announce you, My Lord," he replied. "I can't guarantee the Lord Admiral will see you, however."

"I appreciate it," Kenton said, walking in as the man opened the door and gestured them in.

The house was, perhaps, the most overdone example of richness Kenton had ever seen. There wasn't a corner without a statue of some sort, not a wall without a tapestry. Dozens of furniture pieces cluttered the room, most of them three and four times redundant, all of them wood. Works of ceramic or crystalline art crowded every surface—the slightest bump could have caused hundreds of lak worth of damage.

Kenton raised an eyebrow, looking back at Eric, who just shook his head. A moment later, the servant returned. "My Lord will see you," he said, gesturing for them to follow.

At first, Kenton had assumed that the entryway was a fluke of some sort—a place where the Lord Admiral made a display of his wealth. However, as they walked the hallways toward the back rooms, Kenton was forced to revise that assumption. Every room

was just as bad as the first, with decorations and pieces of art extreme.

“Sell this place, and you could pay of your debts with some left over,” Eric mumbled. It was an exaggeration, of course, but the home was so gaudy that it almost seemed plausible.

For his part, the trackt Ais remained silent, taking in the sights of the Lord Admiral’s house with the same lack of emotion with which he appeared to handle everything.

At last the servant opened a broad set of doors and led them into what appeared to be the Lord Admiral’s study. It was even worse than the rest of the house. The ceiling was hung with no fewer than ten chandeliers, even though the balcony—a structure that took up the entire back wall—provided more than enough light for the room. The floor was covered with several rugs piled on top of one another, an effect duplicated by the overlapping tapestries on the walls.

The Lord Admiral fit with it all perfectly. He was an older man, perhaps forty years old, with flecks of gray in his otherwise dark brown hair. He wore a bright robe of Helm blue, open at the front to reveal a frilly white shirt underneath. Broad white cuffs poked out from the sleeves. Both sleeves and shirt were stained with bright red drops of wine.

“Ah, brother Taisha!” Delious said, raising his arms. He was drunk, of course. “Welcome.”

“Lord Delious,” Kenton said with a nod. “We appreciate your seeing us.”

“Of course,” Delious said, waving dismissively—an action that spilled the rest of his wine on one of the fine rugs. He regarded the mistake with a raised eyebrow, then held out his cup for a refill. “Please, have something to drink.”

“No thank you,” Kenton said.

“Oh, that’s right,” Delious said with a smile. “Sand master’s don’t drink, do they?”

Kenton shook his head. “It does… strange things to us.”

“Pity,” Delious said. “Your friends?”

“Would be pleased to partake of your hospitality,” Eric said. Of course, he was already pouring himself a drink. Ais made no move to do likewise.

“Lord Delious,” Kenton said, stepping forward. “I don’t know how to put this a better way, so I’ll just ask. Are you going to vote for me in two weeks?”

Delious smiled. “You don’t waste words, do you, Lord Mastrell?”

“I’m new at this,” Kenton said with a shrug. “Besides, I don’t have time for words.”

“Oh, I’ve always found one has to make time for words,” Delious countered. “If you don’t have words, then people tend to see through to the really important things. Then they all get depressed.” Delious punctuated the remark by draining his cup.

“I’m only interested in two words, My Lord,” Kenton replied.

“Let me guess,” Delious interrupted. “For or against.”

Kenton nodded.

“Well, I guess that depends,” Delious said, spreading his arms. “You obviously know my policy—as long as Vey is your enemy, I am your friend.”

“And if Vey votes for me?” Kenton asked.

Delious snorted. “My dear friend, I’m supposed to be the drunken fool, not you. Let us please keep to our roles, lest one of us become confused.”

“I know there is little chance, My Lord,” Kenton said. “But what if Vey does vote for me?”

“Then I shall have to vote against you,” Delious said, taking a seat in an oversized chair on the balcony. “You see, my young friend, I have very few beliefs in life. One of them is that wine by far the best companion a man could ask for. The other one is that the Lord Merchant represents all that is evil and vile in our world. Both are philosophies that make my life much easier. One keeps me happy, the other makes all of my decisions for me. As long as I’m working against Vey, I know that I’m doing something good—even if I don’t pay much attention to what is actually happening.”

“Lord Admiral,” Kenton said with a frown. “My cause is just.”

“Honestly, I’d rather not have to think about it. Really, Kenton, I doubt you have much to worry about. It would take more Lak than stone could make to convince Vey to vote for you.”

“Hollow support can be worse than no support at all, Delious,” Kenton shot back.

The Lord Admiral raised his cup. “You’re tense, young man. It’s

probably due to a lifetime without drink. I doubt I am the one you need to be arguing with."

Kenton sighed, turning to Eric, who was playing idly with one of Delious's many crystalline sculptures. Eric looked up slightly, nodding. There was no more to gain from this conversation.

"Thank you for seeing me, My Lord," Kenton said with a slight bow.

"And a good day to you, My Lord," Delious returned.

Kenton left the house in a disappointed mood, barely paying attention to the wonders he passed. He didn't know why he should be so bothered—he hadn't really expected anything more from Delious. Why had the man's responses bothered him so much?

It's because all those years, he thought to himself, *I thought, maybe, just one of them agreed with me. I knew he only voted for me to spite Vey but… up until this day I could still hope.*

"Your task is futile, *Ry'Kensha,*" Ais, almost forgotten, whispered behind. "Even those who vote for you don't really support you. It is the Sand Lord's judgement."

And, for some reason, the comment made Kenton smile. "Futile tasks are the ones I'm best at," he replied.

Delious watched the young Lord Mastrell leave. He had passion and drive; that much would serve him well. "That boy needs to learn to learn that every conversation doesn't have to be an argument," he mumbled to his steward.

"Yes, My Lord."

Delious sat in his chair, spinning his cup in front of him, watching the red liquid reflect light. "Steward," he said thoughtfully. "What opinion would you say the *kelzin* have of mastrells?"

"They hate them, "the steward replied. "Many *kelzin* are Kershtian, and those who aren't are usually *Ker'Reen*. Besides, it is the nature of the wealthy to hate anyone more influential than themselves."

Delious regarded his cup for a moment longer, then smiled to himself.

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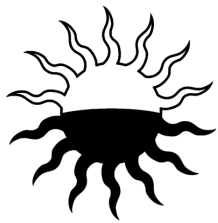

"I can't believe that man!" Khriss sputtered. "I saved his life, traveled across half the *kerla* with him, and still he lied to me! He knew what I was looking for in Lossand, and he deliberately hid what he was from me." Khriss paused. For the hundredth time in just a few minutes, she was confronted with a single incredible fact. The sand mages were real.

She had seen Kenton defy physics, seen him use sand like it was an extension of his own body. The sand had glowed with some inner source of power, shining and radiant, its shifting colors more beautiful than anything else she had experienced on this side of the world.

It appeared that some of the stories, at least, were true. There were foolish ones, of course, that were obviously conjurations of the darkside imagination. Kenton was not twelve feet tall, and he didn't wear deep black robes, or move through shadows. She had seen no hint of him draining the life from those around him to fuel his powers—though, she supposed, she couldn't completely rule out that possibility. He couldn't speak and force people to obey him, like Scythe was said to be able to do—if Kenton had possessed that power, she probably wouldn't have been able to get those slaps in.

Still, despite the obvious falsehoods, some of the stories were true. Sand obeyed Kenton's will, moving as he commanded. He

obviously had power in the society, even if he didn't rule, like the stories claimed. And she had been travelling with him all that time…

"Duchess?" Baon asked in a slightly confused voice.

Khriss looked up with surprise. She had been so wrapped up in her thoughts that she hadn't even noticed their boat arrive at Kezare's docks. Baon and N'Teese stood on the docks, waiting for her to join them. She scrambled up with as much dignity as she could manage as Baon handed the boatman a stone Lak.

"Are you all right, duchess?" Baon asked.

"I'm fine," Khriss snapped.

"You knew he was hiding something," Baon reminded. "It is a standard political move to hide one's true power until necessity reveals it."

"What would you know of politics?" Khriss said.

"More than you might expect," Baon replied, following as she began to stalk through the city. "Are we going anywhere specific?"

Khriss paused, an action that caused her to get jostled and pushed by the flowing crowds. With a quiet curse, she pushed her way over to a less-bustling section of the market, standing in the shade beside a store.

Why was Kenton's deception bothering her? She usually considered herself a level-headed person. She didn't allow herself to get pulled into court politics and gossipings, had never been one to let others enrage her. She had been content with her studies and her simple, non-intrusive political life as Gevin's fiancée.

Of course, no one had ever had reason to anger her before. The court recognized her as a non-threat. She knew how they saw her. She was an important match for Gevin in more ways than one—not only would she unite a very powerful house to the throne, but she would never be a political threat to Evella, wife to Gevin's older brother. It was better to marry a younger son to someone politically reclusive, someone who wouldn't steal the light from the future queen.

So, the court had, for the most part, left Khriss alone. They didn't consider her a factor in their intrigues. They often laughed at her, she knew, but they never did so to her face, and their mockery was never real malice. She was just Gevin's simple, politically-inert

attendant. She wasn't worth the bother of spiting. Even Gevin, with his occasional teasing, had been very careful not to anger her or go too far.

Kenton was different. He didn't seem to care what her rank or station was; he mocked her with aplomb, completely ignoring decorum. He was absolutely insufferable. What was worse, there was nothing she could do about it.

Slowly, as the chaos of the city swirled around her, Khriss felt herself begin to calm. She would worry about the sand masters later, when she could be rational. At least she had found out that they were real—that gave her one important insight. Gevin's mission had not been doomed. He had been right. And, if he had made it to Lossand, then he must have known that.

But why then hadn't he returned to darkside? She could only come up with one conclusion: he was still trying to get the sand masters to help him.

It made sense. Two years was a long time, true, but she knew Gevin. If there was a chance he could complete his goal, he would pay no heed to time. Assuming he had decided that these sand masters could help Elis against the Dynasty, she could see him remaining in Lossand all this time, trying to find a way to persuade some of them to return home with him.

If that was the case, however, why didn't Kenton know who Gevin was? If the Prince really was trying to win favor with the sand masters, then he would have spent a great deal of time in negotiations with their upper officials.

Khriss frowned. Kenton had said he was the sand masters's new leader—that he had only been Lord Mastrell for a day. What had happened?

Suddenly, a memory flashed in front of Khriss's eyes. She was taken away from Kezare's markets, with their bodies, scents, and motion to a place still and stagnant. A broad basin on the sands, strewn with motionless white forms. Bodies, their white robes stained with blood…

"Shella," she whispered softly to herself. "N'Teese, what… happened to the old leader of the sand masters?"

The girl looked up. She had been quietly inching her way toward the shop beside Khriss, one stacked with some sort of bread

cakes that smelt strongly of peppery Kershtian spices. Khriss spoke just as N'Teese's hand was a few inches away from grabbing a cake.

The shopkeeper looked up at the sound, and cursed, swatting at N'Teese. The girl slunk away, grumbling to herself.

"N'Teese, pay attention," Khriss ordered.

"He died," N'Teese grumbled, sitting herself on the ground beside Khriss, resting against a brick wall.

"How?"

"The Kershtians killed him," N'Teese explained. "They killed all of the mastrells, except this new one. He survived somehow."

Khriss felt cold. "He's… alone?"

N'Teese shrugged. "There are other sand masters, just none of the really powerful ones. Of course, everyone says the new one is pretending, that he's not really a mastrell. He's too weak."

"Why would he pretend?" Khriss asked. It didn't seem like something Kenton would do. Of course, he had proven himself quite good at lying…

"If he doesn't, the Taisha will destroy the Diem."

"Destroy it?" Khriss asked with surprise.

N'Teese nodded. "They're going to disband it."

"Why would they do that?" Khriss asked with a frown.

N'Teese shrugged, playing with a few pebbles on the ground before her. "I don't know. Because they want to? No one likes the sand masters."

"Why?"

N'Teese frowned. "I don't know," she said. "Why do you ask so many questions?"

Khriss raised here eyes in exasperation. "Never mind," she mumbled.

So it was possible that Gevin had been talking to the leaders of the sand masters—the ones who were now dead. Perhaps the prince was here, in Kezare somewhere, and simply didn't know she had arrived. It was a big city, filled with many people. Apparently, new arrivals in darkside town weren't all that rare. Perhaps he hadn't even heard she had come looking for him—she had only arrived a day ago, after all.

"Baon," Khriss said, tapping her foot thoughtfully, "how good are you at gathering information?"

Baon raised an eyebrow. “Horrible,” he said simply. “Even on darkside, I’m not very unobtrusive.”

“I need someone to spend time in darkside town, searching for information about Gevin,” she explained. “Could you…?”

“No,” Baon said simply.

“But—”

“Duchess,” Baon said, folding his arms. “I was hired to protect you until such time as you return to Elis. I can’t do that sitting in a pub.”

Khriss sighed.

“Send the professors,” Baon recommended.

“I considered that,” Khriss confessed. “To be honest, Baon, I don’t know how effective they’ll be.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Baon said with a shake of his head. “They’re all you have. Delegation is one of the most difficult parts of leadership, duchess. The simple fact is, most people aren’t going to be as competent as you would like. Some of them will be complete idiots. Your job is to find a place for them to be productive, even if just a little bit. A little bit, plus what you’re doing, will always be more than you working by yourself.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Khriss agreed.” I guess we should walk back to darksider town and tell them.”

“Why not send a messenger?” N’Teese mumbled, still playing with her pebbles.

“One who speaks Dynastic?” Khriss asked. “We need you to take us to visit the Taisha.”

“Write a note,” N’Teese suggested with a shrug.

“A note…?” Khriss asked.

N’Teese pointed to a shop a short distance away. Khriss couldn’t make out the sign, but it prominently displayed a picture of something that resembled a writing pen.

Khriss shrugged, and nodded for Baon to lead the way toward the shop. He moved, slicing through the crowd with N’Teese and Khriss behind.

The shop was light inside—it had several holes in the ceiling to provide illumination. It was small and the walls were stacked with rolls of paper and books. A short Kershtian man approached with a smile. He moved toward Baon and bowed, gesturing for him to take

a seat on a cushion before a small table.

Khriss took the seat instead. The Kershtian started in surprise at the move, seating himself with a slight frown. Baon took a seat beside her, and Khriss found his frown more troublesome.

"What?" Khriss asked as the warrior caught her eye.

"Independence is good, duchess," he replied softy. "But you are fool to flout their traditions so."

"But their traditions are silly," Khriss countered.

"You know that after just a few weeks on this side of the world?"

Khriss paused. "Well, I *do* know that they are demeaning."

"That may be, duchess. However, your life will be much easier if you don't immediately make an enemy out of every Kershtian you meet."

Khriss sighed. "Is there any topic you don't have a lecture prepared for Baon?"

"If you ask my opinion, you will get it," Baon replied simply.

"Right," Khriss mumbled. "N'Teese, tell the merchant I apologize for any offences I may give. Tell him I am still unfamiliar with the customs on this side of the world."

N'Teese shrugged, but she did as asked. At least, Khriss could only assume the girl was doing so.

"I told him," N'Teese. "I also told him you wanted to write a letter."

The Kershtian smiled in the exaggerated way of one whose life centered on pleasing customers and pulled out a dark sheet of paper and a pen tipped with a nib that appeared to be constructed from some sort of chalky substance.

"Tell him I'll write it," Khriss said, reaching for the paper.

The merchant looked surprised, then chuckled uncomfortably.

"He thinks you're joking," N'Teese explained. "The only people on dayside who know how to write are scholars, scribes, and sand masters. Women never learn."

Khriss frowned. "What about the noblemen?"

"The *kelzin*?" N'Teese asked. "They have scribes."

"Well, kindly tell him where I come from, all noblewomen are expected to know how to write. Especially those who are professors in the Elisian university."

She heard Baon sigh softly beside her at the comment.

"Well, at least I tried," she hissed as the scholar reluctantly handed her the paper and pen. Khriss's annoyance was quickly forgotten as she inspected the items. The paper had the same texture as the jerky they had eaten, though it was much thinner and drier.

"Made from carapace?" she asked N'Teese.

The girl nodded. "Pressed and dried."

"I wonder what keeps it from rotting," Khriss asked, turning the pen around to inspect its nib. It wasn't quite like chalk—it was more oily. Experimentally, she made a little scribble at the top of the sheet. The line it left was thin and uniform, but it smudged easily. Surely they didn't write books in the same way?

She paused her ponderings as she heard N'Teese snickering beside her.

"What?" she demanded.

"The merchant," N'Teese explained, pointing at the Kershtian. "He thinks you're slow of mind."

Khriss blushed, realizing what the man must have thought, watching her rub the paper, play with the pen, and make incoherent scribbles. She sniffed in disdain at his amused expression, and began to write.

She had intended a quick message, but the merchant's assumptions incited her to greater things. She wrote a very detailed explanation of what she had discovered at the building known as the Diem, she explained her theories on Gevalden's whereabouts, and she explained her intentions for the rest of the day. She told Cynder and Acron what she wanted them to do in darksider town, how she wanted them to do it, and what she expected them to discover. And, just to look clever, she switched to formal Kersha at the end. She might not be able to speak the language all that well, but she had a decent written knowledge of it.

In the end she took up five full sheets of paper. When she was finished, she looked up to find a properly amazed expression on the Kershtian's face. He accepted the papers from her hands, looking over them. Then he reached over and picked up a large metal plate of some sort—it had been resting in direct sunlight. He pressed it against each paper in turn.

Khriss watched with interest, taking one of the papers from him when he was done. It was warm to the touch, and the oil-like white ink no longer smudged beneath her fingers. “Fascinating,” she mumbled. Then she looked up. “How much do we owe him?”

N’Teese handled the negotiations. “Five Lak,” she finally said. “It a little expensive, but he’s going to have to hire a courier who knows *Lonzare*. I told him where to find the house.”

“Good,” Khriss said, nodding to Baon, who picked out a blue-and-white five lak coin and gave it to the Kershtian. “What time is it?” she asked.

Baon reached down, checking Cynder’s pocketwatch—which Khriss couldn’t carry, for lack of a pocket in her dayside robes.

“Two o’clock,” he said.

“First hour,” N’Teese countered, sticking her head out the door.

“Same thing,” Khriss said, rising.

The merchant did likewise, bowing slightly, his medallion twinkling in the light.

“We probably could have walked to the house and back by now,” Khriss said with a sigh, realizing she shouldn’t have spent so much time on the letter. “Well, let’s get going.”

“Where to?” N’Teese asked as Khriss replaced her glasses and walked out into the sun.

“Who’s left?”

“The Lord Farmer, the Lord Artisan, and the Lord Admiral.”

“Admiral,” Khriss mused. “That sounds important.”

“It isn’t,” N’Teese replied. “He doesn’t really do anything. Everyone knows that the Helm is really run by the Shipowner’s Circle.”

Khriss frowned. “Why is one Taisha a figurehead, while the others aren’t? Is the man just a fool?”

N’Teese shrugged. “Well, he is,” she admitted. “But I think the Lord Admirals are always fools.”

“All right,” Khriss said. “Then, let’s try the Lord Artisan.”

N’Teese nodded, and dashed off through the crowd, leaving Khriss to sigh and try to follow.

Two hours later, Khriss was beginning to wonder if this Council of Taisha had collectively decided to drive her mad.

The Lord Artisan’s offices were much more comfortable than the

Hall had been, but the wait didn't seem to be going any more quickly. The building sat on the eastern edge of the island, far away from the docks and their hustle. This area was still busy, of course, but not quite so chaotic. The buildings here seemed to be larger, and though they were still pressed close together, they weren't as narrow.

The Lord Artisan's waiting room was on the ground floor, and it was decorated with two dozen seals that N'Teese explained were representations of the Draft's sub-Professions. Apparently, the Lord Artisan oversaw varied activities, including everything from carpentry and cobblery to medicine and painting.

Khriss sat back on the bench. It was cushioned, though the cushion was, of course, filled with sand. There was a basin filled with drinking water, and even a man playing a stringed instrument quietly in the corner. The large room was filled with a dozen or so people, all waiting, Khriss presumed, for the same thing she was.

"I told you he was busy," N'Teese mumbled. She sat on the floor beside the bench, absently spinning one of the carapace cups from the water basin.

Khriss sighed, leaning back. The waiting was frustrating, but she was getting better at it. She was beginning to realize that she wasn't going to get anywhere on dayside without a long wait first. At least the Artisan's steward, a younger Lossandin man with large ears, assured her that they were actually waiting to see the Lord Artisan, as opposed to just waiting to make an appointment. The steward sat at a small desk beside the large set of carapace doors that Khriss assumed led to the Taisha's conference room. So far, during several hours of wait, only three people had been allowed in.

She heard talking in the hallway beside her—more people coming to wait in line. N'Teese was right, the Lord Artisan certainly was busy. She was surprised he…

Khriss froze. Three forms had just walked into the room. A Kershtian in a dark daysider policeman's uniform, the familiar curly-haired man who dressed like a darksider, and… Kenton.

He strode confidently, his bright white robe shining in the room's sunlight. The golden sash at his waist seemed to glow like one of the strings of the sand he could control. Kenton walked directly up to the Artisan's steward, who immediately stood and

began to bow obsequiously. A mumble ran through the room as those waiting noticed Kenton.

The steward bowed a few more times, then pulled open the Lord Artisan's doors and slipped inside. A moment later, the man the Artisan had been meeting with—a Kershtian whose robe bore the symbol of a stonemason—walked out, followed by the steward. The big-eared man bowed one last time to Kenton, gesturing toward the still-open door.

Khriss watched with stupefaction. "He *is* important," she mumbled. Then, moving before she missed her chance, she jumped off the bench and rushed forward to grab Kenton's arm.

The sand master jumped in surprise—he obviously hadn't seen her in the corner.

Khriss smiled sweetly at the confused steward, and rested her head on Kenton's shoulder. "Tell him I'm with you," she ordered under her breath.

Kenton looked down in confusion. "Khriss?"

"Tell him," she pled.

"Didn't you slap me twice just earlier today?"

Khriss blushed. "You deserved it," she defended.

Kenton chuckled. "You might be right," he admitted. Then he mumbled something to the steward, who was looking at Khriss suspiciously. "You can come," Kenton continued in Dynastic, "but only if you promise to be good."

"Good?" she asked.

"Yes," Kenton said. "The Lord Artisan is a busy man—try to restrict yourself to a dozen or two questions."

Khriss snorted, dropping his arm now that her ploy had worked and stalking triumphantly through the open door. Kenton followed with a shake of his head.

The Lord Artisan's meeting room was simply decorated, containing only a rug, a few paintings, and a table—which appeared to be constructed from plates of carapace. The table was stacked neatly with papers and ledgers. The Lord Artisan wore a simple gray robe, loose at the front instead of tied, with a tan underobe on beneath. He was a middle-aged man with a large, oval face and a businesslike attitude.

He set a ledger on the desk as Kenton walked in, greeting him in

Lossandin.

"He says 'Greetings, Lord Mastrell. You travel with quite a large group. I fear my simple office barely fits them all.'"

Khriss looked down, grateful for N'Teese's translation. The Lord Artisan was right—with Kenton's group and Khriss's, the small meeting room was rather full. Baon and the Kershtian trackt quickly moved to opposite corners at the back, however, watching each other carefully. The move freed up a little room in the center, making it seem less crowded.

"I apologize for the intrusion, Lord Rite," N'Teese translated Kenton's response. "I've found that my company has become increasingly popular since we last saw one another."

The Lord Artisan smiled slightly. "You will find that such is the norm for those of our position. How can I help you?"

"I believe you know, Lord Artisan," Kenton replied. "I need your vote."

Khriss frowned. Kenton's words were polite, but he obviously didn't have any experience with politics. His attitude was defiant, even antagonistic.

"Yes, I assumed that was what this was for," the Lord Artisan said with a quiet sigh. He reached over, selecting a ledger from the table. "I appreciate your position, Lord Mastrell. But you know it would be difficult for me to give you any kind of support."

"The only thing I know, My Lord, is that the Diem has been treated unfairly," Kenton countered. "Instead of confronting its problems when they should have, the Diem's opponents are taking advantage of its weakness to brush it away. You think this will let you ignore us, but I promise you it will only bring further problems."

Khriss watched the interchange with interested eyes. Her first evaluation had been wrong—Kenton obviously had experience with politics. Or, at least, he had experience with debate. His stance, his inflections—he knew how to argue. However, he obviously wasn't handling the situation very well. The Lord Artisan had welcomed him amiably at first, but now the man was getting defensive, reacting to Kenton's attacks.

"I care nothing for inter-Profession arguments, Lord Mastrell," Rite said frankly. "You know that I have tried my entire career to

avoid them. My only concern is to care for those who have elected me their leader. It is in their interest that I voted against you, not because of any personal enmity."

"The new A'Kar is calling for blood, Lord Rite," Kenton responded. "Times are changing. What will the members of your Profession think when this new *DaiKeen* overruns Lossand? Is it in your interest to destroy your country's longest, and most fearsome, source of protection?"

Rite paused for a moment, then shook his head. "You're right, Lord Mastrell. Times are changing. I don't know about the A'Kar or his warrior priests. I do know about one group of thieves even more fearsome, however. One who has been pillaging Lossand for centuries. A group that has been taking what does not belong to them, offering no payment, and leaving good workmen destitute.

"The sand masters are without law, Lord Kenton. Their mastrells take without need. They hoard works of art and demand our precious creations more out of spite than of want. Beyond that, they give nothing back to Lossand. Nothing. They offer no goods, they perform no service, and they give no reason we should keep them. I cannot, with good conscience, allow that to continue."

There must be a vote of some sort coming, Khriss guessed. *N'Teese said the Taisha wanted to disband the sand masters.*

However, at this rate, Kenton would never gain any support. He was too argumentative—he would be better at convincing enemies to support him than friends. He needed compromise right now, not hostility.

"N'Teese," Khriss whispered. "I want you to translate exactly what I tell you."

Kenton frowned. His biggest problem was the fact that he agreed with Rite. The Lord Artisan was right to vote against the Diem. Kenton would have done the same in his position. No amount of arguing would change the fact that over the last few centuries the mastrells had acted more like bandits than protectors.

Kenton needed to rethink his strategy—the current one was obviously getting him nowhere. Rite was said to be the most level-headed and honest of the Taishin. If Kenton couldn't convince him…

"You say that the sand masters stole from your people," Khriss

said suddenly. “What kind of recompense would you need to forgive their trespass?”

Kenton looked up with a frown. What was she doing? She had no idea what the argument was even about. The little girl at her side—the one who had been with her earlier—translated the words into Lossandin.

“Ledgers have been kept of what the Diem owes my Profession,” Rite replied, speaking as if Kenton had said the words. He obviously assumed that Khriss was one of Kenton’s aids, speaking on his authority. “It isn’t what is owed that bothers me,” Rite continued. “The possibility of future thefts is always more worrisome than what has happened in the past.”

“And if the thefts stopped?” Khriss asked.

“They will not,” the Lord Artisan replied with a shake of his head. “The fact is, the Diem needs what the other Professions produce. It can’t eat without the farmers’ food; it can’t function without the Hall’s scribes; and it can’t survive without my cooks and servants. Even if you agree to stop taking works of art from my craftsmen, the thefts will continue as long as the Diem is in existence.”

Kenton watched, uncertain whether to be angry for the intrusion or thankful for the distraction. Perhaps if Khriss continued with her eternal questioning, Kenton could think of a way to bring the Lord Artisan to his side.

“Then, is there a way that the Diem could pay for what it takes?” Khriss asked.

Rite shrugged. “I don’t see how. The only money the Diem has it receives as gifts from the other Professions.”

“Yes, but can you ignore that sand mastery is a wondrous tool?” Khriss asked, walking forward, to stand beside the Lord Artisan’s desk, speaking more friendly.

“I do not deny that,” the Lord Artisan replied, seating himself on the side of his desk. “Unfortunately, its practitioners have squandered its potential.”

“That can change,” Khriss assured. “You yourself said the future is more important than the past. Is there no way the sand masters could be of use to the members of your Profession?”

The Lord Artisan set down his ledger, rubbing at his chin in

thought. “If the stories are true—I can never be certain, considering how secretive the mastrells are—then there are many ways they could be useful. I’ve seen a sand master lift more than ten men, heard reports of a mastrell drilling a hole through a foot of stone with his mind. Those sorts of abilities would be extremely useful to the construction-oriented sub-professions. But, such speculation is useless. The sand masters would never lower themselves to such a level.”

“And if they would?” Khriss asked.

The Lord Artisan cocked his head slightly to the side, then shrugged. “If an arrangement could be made, then I would be much more amiable toward the Diem. However, I couldn’t allow them to continue taking wantonly. That kind of power is too easily abused.”

Kenton lowered his hands to his waist, discarding his planned arguments. Khriss continued to speak through her diminutive translator, her voice encouraging. Slowly, the Lord Artisan’s eyes became less hostile.

“They could take a percentage of the projects they help complete,” Khriss continued. “And apply that toward what they need from your members. That way, if you need more help for some reason, there is incentive for them to cooperate.”

“Your proposal has merit, Lord Mastrell,” Rite said, standing and looking at Kenton. “You should have put this idea forward sooner. Perhaps if the other Taisha knew you were willing to give sand mastery a practical use, the previous vote would not have gone so strongly against you.”

“It is a relatively… new proposal, Lord Artisan,” Kenton replied. “I haven’t even had much time to think it over myself.”

Rite nodded. “So is what your associate says an offer or a postulation?”

Kenton paused. It completely broke with tradition. Sand masters didn’t sell their powers for money—it was precisely that sort of transgression that had lost Drile his mastrell’s sash. But, if the money went to the Diem instead of individuals… Besides, the Diem had been selling itself for years. It had been funded in exchange for protection from Kershtian threats.

“It is an offer, My Lord,” Kenton replied.

“Then I accept, My Lord,” Rite said after a moment’s thought.

Then he held up a finger. “Provided the Diem can pay back its debts as a sign of good faith.”

“How am I supposed—” Kenton cut himself off. He took a deep breath. “All right, My Lord. The Lady Judge has placed a similar restriction on me. You’ll get your seven hundred thousand Lak.”

Rite shook his head. “Seven hundred thousand? I don’t know who has been giving you your information, Lord Mastrell. You owe us a hundred and fifty thousand, and the Fields another fifty thousand.”

Two hundred thousand? Kenton frowned in confusion. Then to whom did the Diem owe the other five hundred thousand? The Lord Merchant?

“You’ll get your Lak, My Lord,” Kenton promised, bowing slightly after the manner of Taisha, an action mimicked by Rite. “I understand you are a busy man, and…”

Kenton trailed off, noticing a glaring look from Khriss.

“Oh, just one more thing, My Lord,” Kenton said.

Rite looked up from his stacks of papers. “Yes?”

“My associate here, the Duchess Khrissalla, is searching for a friend of hers. His name is Prince Gevalden of darkside—he is a very important *kelzi* in her homeland. He would have arrived in Lossand a couple of years ago. Have you ever heard of him?”

Rite paused thoughtfully, then shook his head. “I know little of the workings of darksiders, but I would probably recall if someone of that level of prestige came to meet me. I do not remember any such meeting.”

“Thank you anyway, My Lord,” Kenton said.

“And you, Lord Mastrell,” Rite responded. “I have often wondered what our two Professions could accomplish if we worked together. You may not realize this, but I have, over the years, offered the Diem many proposals similar to the very one you just gave me. I was always rejected.”

“I hadn’t realized that, Lord Artisan,” Kenton said, blinking slightly in surprise.

Rite nodded. “Good day, Lord Mastrell.”

Kenton strode out of the room much more optimistic than when he had strode in. It wasn’t a complete victory—he still had to pay of the Diem’s debts. Still, at least one of the Taisha seemed to have

come to his side. If he could convince one, then perhaps…

Of course, he hadn't been the one to do the convincing. He turned as he left the room to find Khriss following behind, smiling with a self-satisfied air.

"That was… well done," he complimented thankfully.

Khriss snorted. "Don't mistake me," she replied. "I'm still angry at you. I just thought I would intervene before the Lord Artisan had us thrown out of the building."

"I'm sorry about your prince," Kenton said.

Khriss frowned. "I don't really know what I expected," she confessed. "Why would he know anything about darksiders? You people don't even know what nobility is. Anyway, where are we going next?"

"We?" Kenton asked with raised eyebrows.

"I assume you're visiting the Taisha, trying to get support so they don't destroy your Profession."

Kenton raised his eyebrows in surprise. She knew a lot for having only been in Kezare for a day. "True," he admitted. "But I won't be able to do any more today. Most Taisha close their offices at third hour." He nodded toward the closed doors before them to prove his point. The waiting room, nearly full when he had arrived, was now completely empty—its occupants would have to return the next day to continue their waiting.

Khriss muttered something in Dynastic Kenton didn't catch. "All right," she said. "Tomorrow then? Who will you visit tomorrow?"

"I was planning on going to see the Lord General," Kenton explained.

"He's gone," Khriss replied. "He went on a hunt of some sort."

"A hunt?" Kenton asked with confusion. "To the deep sands? Why would he…"

"He's trying to avoid you," Eric said, pouring himself a drink from the room's water basin. "Father always goes on hunts when he thinks a lot of people are going to try and visit him. He does it just to spite them."

"Father?" Khriss asked with surprise.

Eric smiled, raising his cup as if in toast, then gulping it down.

"Who are you?" Khriss wondered.

"Someone of absolutely no import," Eric replied, "and

determined to stay that way, thank you."

"I don't have time to wait," Kenton said, frowning. "I assume he'll head for the closest deep sand."

Eric nodded.

"It's only about a few days away…" Kenton mused. "Less if you have a quick mount."

Eric smiled. "Father won't take kindly to having his hunt interrupted."

"I don't see that he's left me much choice," Kenton said.

"I'm going with you," Khriss announced.

Kenton sighed. "Khrissalla, I am not going to drag you all the way to the deep sands."

"I can—"

"No," Kenton interrupted. "The deep sands are dangerous enough for those who have lived their entire lives on dayside. I'm sorry, but I can't bring someone I need to watch over."

"After what I just did for you?" she asked incredulously. "You owe me!"

Kenton sighed. "Not again… I appreciate what you did in there. The Lord General is different than Rite, however. He won't react to negotiating or sweet-talking. I'm still not sure how I'm going to convince him." Then, to head off her continued objection, Kenton raised a hand. "Look, I'll ask him about Gevalden for you."

Khriss frowned. "And what am I supposed to do while you're gone? None of the Taisha will see me."

"I'll give you a letter of recommendation," Kenton replied. "You can use it to get in to speak with them."

Khriss frowned, then shot a look at Baon that Kenton couldn't quite read. Finally she nodded. "All right. N'Teese, go with him and get the letter. Bring it back to our house."

And, without another word, she pushed open the doors leading outside, and strode out.

Kenton looked at the constructions with an interested eye. Between the time he had left to visit the Lord Admiral and his return, the Diem's courtyard had gone through a transformation.

Workers had erected scaffolding and were proceeding to build a broad stairway leading to the upper floors. The men worked efficiently—they couldn't afford to displease the Lord Mastrell—but

quickly—they also knew they probably wouldn't be paid for their efforts.

"Do you like it, sir?" Dirin asked anxiously. "I thought, I mean, since the ladders didn't work, that…"

"It's a good idea, Dirin," Kenton replied approvingly. "Exactly what I was looking for. Thank you."

"They're going to build one in every corner," Dirin explained. "Then everyone will be able to get to all three floors."

"Perfect," Kenton said. The steps weren't ready yet, however, so he called his sand to life.

"N'Teese, wait here. I'll go write your mistress her letter."

The girl shrugged indifferently as Kenton rose into the air. He landed on his balcony and stepped into his quarters, walking directly to the smaller side-room with the desk and bookshelf. Where had Praxton kept his writing materials?

He searched in the desk for a moment before finding what he wanted. He leaned down, penning a letter requesting the Taisha agree to see Khriss.

He was about halfway done when he heard a *zinkall* fire behind him.

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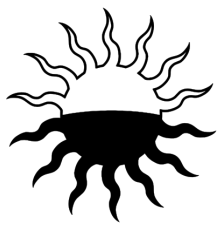

Ais stood in the sand's most unholy of locations, surrounded by the *Ry'Kenshan*. He felt an odd, almost morbid interest in the Diem. He had lived in Kezare for all of his thirty-six years, nearly two decades of that as a trackt, and he had never once visited the building.

Sand masters surrounded him. The sense of loathing he felt had almost grown to the point of over-sensitivity—there were so many of them that the disgust was overwhelming. He remained stiff, however. In control. This was just another assignment. He wasn't associating with the sand masters out of choice; they would not taint him with their blasphemous disregard for the Sand Lord's powers. He was fulfilling his duty, and nothing else.

But, is that all? A voice in his head wondered. *Can you really claim to be free from contamination? Regardless of what you say, you were given a choice. You could have refused the Lady Judge.*

Other Kershtians would see this assignment as a conflict between their religious views and their profession. Such was why they refused to join the Hall.

It is not a conflict! Ais told himself forcefully. But, what would he do when he found himself unable to meet the demands of both religion and duty?

Ais cast such thoughts from his mind. Eighteen years in the Hall,

and he'd never once run into such a paradox. He never would. Being a Kershtian did not make him incapable of being a trackt.

He turned to look around the Diem. This Kenton, the new Lord Mastrell, had disappeared onto his balcony in a garish display of power. Ais was left with the little Kershtian girl—or was she Lossandin?—and the one known as Eric.

Ais felt another stab of doubt. Eric stood a short distance away, speaking affably with a red-haired sand master. Did the man recognize him? He must. Why then hadn't he said anything?

When Ais had first seen the man, he had nearly been paralyzed with shock. This man, the one who had saved him not a day before, was an apparent friend of the new Lord Mastrell. Ais did his best, struggling to maintain his sense of control and purpose, but at the back of his mind he couldn't get rid of the anxiety. This man knew what he was—what he became. The shame was nearly more than Ais could bear…

Ais took a deep breath, heading off his rage before it became visible. He couldn't afford to lose control, not here, in front of the sand masters. He had to remain strong. Where was the Lord Mastrell, anyway?

Ais paused. He thought he'd seen something. A shadowed form moving past the Lord Mastrell's balcony. Ais squinted, taking a step forward. What was…

A body crashed into Kenton's balcony, smashing the banister and arcing out into the air above the courtyard. Its form, clothed in Kershtian robes, dropped to the ground with a muffled thump.

"*Aiesha!*" Ais cursed, dashing forward.

Kenton spun, waiting for the arrow to rip into his flesh. It never came. As he turned he caught sight of a Kershtian standing in the doorway, his forehead scarred with the square of the A'Kar's new *DaiKeen*. The man was shaking his *zinkall*, an arrow jammed halfway out of its launch tube.

Their eyes met and held for an eternal moment, then Kenton dropped to the ground as two arrows shot over the man's shoulders, fired from behind.

Kenton came up with a handful of sand. The first Kershtian raised his *zinkall*, abandoning the jammed arrow to fire from one of the other tubes. Kenton didn't intend to give him the opportunity.

His sand burst to life with a flash, then a ribbon screamed directly for the Kershtian's chest.

The arrow fired just before Kenton's sand arrived, but it went wide, snapping into the wood of Praxton's desk. The ribbon of sand hit the Kershtian's chest at a speed impossible of the most powerful of *zinkall*.

The sand turned black and sprayed off the Kershtian's armor like water splashing against a stone wall.

Kenton stood stupefied for a deadly moment, staring disbelievingly at the black sand that lay scattered on the floor before his opponent. *They're… terken! Impervious to sand mastery!* He thought with amazement.

Jut then the Kershtian's third arrow fired directly at his chest. The arrow clipped the edge of the jammed one as it left the tube, and the shot went just a bit to the right, glancing off one of Kenton's ribs instead of taking him in the stomach as intended. Still, the flash of pain was powerful, and it caused Kenton to gasp, bringing him back to the conflict.

The Kershtians were *terken*. As incredible as it sounded, he had to accept it for now.

He drew his sword at the same time as the Kershtian did, and rushed forward to engage the man. The assassins had him trapped in the smaller side room—fortunately, that meant that only one could get to him at a time. Unfortunately, the windows were too small for him to escape through. If he didn't get out quickly, eventually one of the men in the main room would get in a lucky shot.

The Kershtian prepared for Kenton's attack—they had obviously been warned that this sand master was also a swordsman. The man raised his carapace sword, falling into a fighting stance to meet Kenton's charge. Therefore, he was completely shocked when instead of attacking him, Kenton flipped over his head with a sand-boosted jump.

Kenton's tucked spin barely fit through the space between the Kershtian and the ceiling. As he landed he immediately swung a blow at the Kershtian's unprotected back, dropping the man with a swipe of the sword. Then he began to dash toward the room's back door, trying to avoid *zinkall* shots from the two assassins positioned

near the balcony.

Arrows snapped against the stone floor and walls of his room, one coming close enough he could feel the wind of its passing. Kenton rushed past the room's plush chairs and leapt over Praxton's long carapace conference table, finally arriving at the exit. He threw open the door, and came face-to-face with a fourth assassin, his *zinkall* lowered to fire.

Kenton cursed, dodging backward as the man fired. Kenton's sand whipped down, trying to grab the arrow. However, as soon as his sand touched the missile, it fell black and stale.

The arrows too? Kenton thought incredulously. *What on the sands is happening?*

Kenton managed to dodge the arrow, but he knew the real danger wasn't from in front. The two men behind fired their final shots even as Kenton jumped to the side. Kenton allowed himself to fall, throwing himself backward. The two arrows passed over him as he fell, one hitting the Kershtian in the doorway.

Just before he hit the ground, Kenton caught himself with his sand, then used it to flip him back to his feet, spinning him in the air to land facing the two assassins by the balcony. The men held their Kershtian shortspears at the ready, their arrows spent, as they inched toward Kenton in attack stances.

The two men approached carefully, moving to flank him. They were out of arrows, but Kenton knew that if he tried to run, he would likely get a spear in the back. Kenton backed toward the doorway—and only then did he realize his mistake. He heard a sound behind him—the Kershtian who had been waiting outside wasn't dead.

All four men moved at once. Kenton leapt forward, dropping his sword to control his sand with both hands. Both spearmen moved to strike. The man in the doorway collapsed—his wound proving too much for him.

The spearmen drove in for the kill, driving their weapons toward Kenton's chest. Unfortunately, they hadn't realized where Kenton's sand was going. It shot between them, grabbing the room's long carapace table. Kenton used the large piece of furniture like an enormous club, slamming it into the side of one of his opponents. The man dropped, his bones cracking ominously. The second man

looked to the side in surprise, allowing Kenton to sidestep his spear thrust.

"You're *terken*," Kenton mumbled in Kershtian, stepping backward. "But you aren't Ter-table now, are you?"

The Kershtian didn't appreciate the joke. He took a careful step away, standing between Kenton and the balcony. Kenton held his hands before him, the enormous conference table hanging in the air beside him.

The Kershtian continued to back away, regarding the table with unreadable eyes. *They said you would be impervious to my sand,* Kenton thought, taking a step forward. The table followed. *They didn't warn you that sand doesn't have to touch you to be deadly.*

The Kershtian leapt forward, his spear raised. Kenton spun in a full circle, swinging the table with all his power. There was a sickening crunch. The Kershtian's body was hurled limply through the air, flying across the room to smash through balcony's banister and continue out into the courtyard. Kenton heard it thump to the ground below.

Kenton lowered the table with a sigh, letting his sand die as he reached down pick up his sword. It was purely by happenstance that he placed the table where he did, blocking the arrow.

Kenton jumped, dodging backward as another Kershtian rushed through the open doorway behind him.

How many of them are there? Kenton thought, growiling to himself with anger.

He turned and ran. He dashed toward the balcony as the Kershtian behind him lowered his weapon to fire again. Kenton rolled toward the balcony, barely grabbing a handful of sand from the floor as his momentum carried him off the now banister-less balcony.

A moment later Kenton reappeared, launched into the air in a spray of glowing sand. His momentum carried him high into the air. And there, looking down on the Diem, he saw two tan-robed forms. They stood on the other side of the building, preparing to climb down a rope to enter the room on the opposite side of the hallway as Kenton's own.

Sands curse you! Kenton thought with rage. They weren't satisfied with leaving Diem to die after cutting off all its limbs; they

had to deliver the killing blow themselves.

Kenton yelled, directing his fall so that he landed beside the surprised Kershtian assassins. The first one barely had time to turn as Kenton angrily whipped his sword free and attacked.

As Kenton swung his weapon, three ribbons of sand fell in behind the blade, pushing it forward with supernatural strength. The sand-driven blow sheared completely through the man's waist, spraying his companion's face with gore. The second man looked up, dangling from the rope with a surprised expression. Kenton's sand sliced the rope. The Kershtian fell, bouncing off the side of the balcony below and continuing down three stories.

Kenton took a deep breath. When he turned he found two more Kershtians standing on the other side of the roof, near where Kenton's own balcony would be. They had bows.

Kenton gathered his sand, preparing to dodge away. Fear struck him as he did so, however. The men were aiming carefully—this wasn't like the wild battle below, with the short distance *zinkall*. Bowmen would easily pick him off.

A hand grabbed one of the archers from below, toppling him to the ground. Kenton started in surprise as a dark-clothed form pulled himself up onto the roof. The second bowman dropped his weapon with a cry of surprise, reaching for the carapace hatchet at his waist. Ais's *zinkall* took him point-blank in the face.

The archer stumbled backward as Ais spun, smashing the armored top of his *zinkall* into the second man's face, toppling him off the top of the ceiling in a wide arcing fall.

Kenton jumped, guiding the spring into forty-foot long leap that landed him beside the Kershtian trackt.

"Quickly, *Ry'Kensha*, how many have you killed?"

Kenton frowned, but mentally counted. Four in the first attack, then the one whose *zinkall* had hit the table—he was probably one of the archers. Two on the roof, two more Ais had killed.

"Eight," Kenton said.

Ais nodded, relaxing. "You are free for one day, then," he mumbled, kneeling beside the man he had shot in the face.

"One day!" Kenton asked incredulously.

Ais turned the dead man's head to the side, inspecting the scarred *DaiKeen* symbol on the forehead. "One day, at the least,"

Ais said flatly. “Look at the *DaiKeen*.”

Still confused by the battle, Kenton knelt. How could this man be so cold after what had just happened? “It’s the new *DaiKeen*,” Kenton said with a frown. “The A’Kar’s holy warriors.”

“Yes,” Ais agreed. “Now look at the sides, the two smaller scars on either side of the square.”

Kenton looked closely. “They’re fresh,” he said with surprise.

Ais nodded, standing. “Assassin’s marks. The warrior *DaiKeen* has used them for centuries—the A’Kar must have adapted them to his new *DaiKeen* as well.” The trackt moved to climb down the side of the building, dropping down onto Kenton’s broken balcony.

“Wait!” Kenton said with annoyance, using his sand to drop him down beside Ais. “Assassin’s marks—what do they mean?”

“It means you have been targeted as an enemy of the Kershtian people,” Ais explained. “Or, at least, the enemy of the A’Kar.”

“But all sand masters are the Kershtians’ enemies,” Kenton objected.

Ais nodded, kneeling beside a second body and checking his forehead as well. “Yes, *Ry’Kensha*, but this is different. The A’Kar has given a specific family the task of killing you. It is a formal charge—they may send eight warriors at you every other day until they succeed.”

“Eight warriors!” Kenton said with surprise.

“Correct. Assuming, of course, that they can gather so many. Kershtian family lines are extensive, but tend to be scattered.”

“Eight warriors a day…” Kenton said, distractedly taking a gulp of water from his *qido*. “Oh, sands. When will this end?”

“When you kill their leader,” Ais informed, as if the question hadn’t been rhetorical. The trackt continued to inspect bodies, looking over *zinkall* arrows and armor.

“Their leader?” Kenton asked hopefully.

“The one the A’Kar formally charged with killing you. Defeat him, and assassins can’t be sent against you for another year.”

“But, how do I know who that is?” Kenton protested.

“Usually it’s the family head, though not necessarily. A member of one family could be given the charge, but, if his own family has few warriors, he could be assigned a different family to use as his killers.” Ais spoke dispassionately, as if the very man before him

wasn't the subject of said killing.

"But, he could be all the way across the sands," Kenton said, shaking his head.

"No," Ais corrected, rising from his inspections to walk over to Kenton. "He has to personally direct the assassins. He'll be in Kezare somewhere. Look at this."

Ais proffered his hand, showing Kenton a translucent substance on his fingers. It was thick, like a jelly, but smooth like oil. Kenton recognized it easily. "Dissolved carapace," he replied.

Ais nodded. "The warriors are smeared with it, as are their weapons and their armor."

Kenton frowned in confusion. Then an idea struck him. He brought forward one of his ribbons—he didn't dare release them, no matter what Ais said—to touch the paste on Ais's fingers.

The trackt hissed, dropping his hand. "Do not touch me with that!" he ordered.

Kenton raised his hands. "Sorry," he said. Instead he sent the sand over to one of the fallen bodies, delicately touching it to the thin layer of paste on the man's face. The sand immediately turned black, and dropped from Kenton's control.

"What would happen," Kenton mumbled, "if you dissolved the carapace of a *TerKen* deep sandling?"

Ais nodded thoughtfully. "A clever idea," he agreed. Then the Kershtian walked toward the room's exit. "I am going to go make a report on this. You will be safe for the rest of the day."

"Ais," Kenton called.

The trackt paused.

"Thank you. You saved me."

Ais turned slowly, then walked back to Kenton, stopping just in front of him. His eyes were cold and hateful. "Do not be mistaken, *Ry'Kensha*," he whispered, "I protect you out of duty, not out of desire. I hate you. I hate your kind. On any other day, I would have applauded these men's attempts.

"You will try to cur my favor," Ais continued. "You will attempt to become my friend. You will try to laugh with me, prove to me that you aren't what I assume. You may even save my life. None of this will change my opinion. You are all that is evil on the sands, Lord Mastrell. If the time comes, I want you to realize one thing; I

would rather die than live with the shame of being rescued by your vile powers."

Kenton felt cold, his grateful words falling dead on his lips.

Ais spun, marching out of the room, leaving Kenton with his thoughts, his insecurities, and room full of corpses.

Kenton stood on his balcony, wishing he still had a banister to lean against. Instead he leaned back against the wall, looking out at the courtyard. Dirin's workmen were done for the day, and they had left a skeleton of scaffolding around their nearly-finished staircase. It would have been done, had Ais's mad dash up to the third floor not included scrambling up steps that weren't yet complete, ruining some of the work.

The courtyard was quiet—most of the sand masters were getting ready for bed. The Diem followed Taisha standard time, sleeping between eleventh hour and third hour. The mandate wasn't really necessary—there wasn't a need for everyone to sleep at the same time. The mastrells, however, hadn't wanted any noise during their sleeping hours, so they ordered everyone to sleep at the same time as they.

Kenton's near-assassination had caused quite a stir amongst the remaining Diem members; at first, he had assumed that his victory would strengthen his position with the other sand masters. Many were impressed that he had managed to fend them off—fear of the Kershtians had been high in the Diem since the slaughter.

Unfortunately, Drile had soon made use of the situation. The former mastrell claimed that the sand masters weren't safe in Lossand, that the Kershtians and the trackts were working together to kill them all. His words didn't make sense, but they didn't have to. Any addition to the confusion and general sense of paranoia in the Diem served Drile's purpose. Just hours after the attack, almost no one remembered that Kenton had actually defeated six assassins—they all focused on the fact that he had nearly lost. If the Lord Mastrell wasn't safe, who was?

Drile's in league with them, Kenton decided. *Somehow he poisoned the mastrells at the conference, and now he's using the assassins to wrestle control from me.*

Kenton sighed, leaning his head back against the wall. There were too many battles to fight, to many enemies on each side. He

spent a day trying to get the Taisha to follow him, but in the meantime Kershtian assassins were sneaking into his rooms. He fought the Kershtians, only to find his success flipped around by Drile's cunning ploys.

There were too many questions. Why had he spontaneously gained the ability master three ribbons? Who was leading the Kershtian assassins? *And what about you?* He thought, looking down at the ledger in his hands. It was opened to the last page of entries, the one titled 'money owed' at the top. The amount at the bottom was very distinct—seven-hundred thousand Lak. To whom did he owe the other five hundred thousand? What if he did find a way to pay off the Lord Artisan? Would some debtor step forward at the last moment and demand payment?

"Lord Mastrell, we're finished in here," a voice said. Kenton turned, nodding to the group of trackts who had come to clean up the bodies and fill out reports. The man—who had introduced himself as Ais's second—saluted and nodded for his men to follow him out of the room. A few moments later they appeared on the top of the staircase and worked their way down, several younger trackts carrying the corpse-bags.

When they were gone, Kenton was left alone again. *I should probably get some sleep,* he told himself. *Assuming I really do try and find the Lord General tomorrow, then it will probably be a long day.*

Yet, he didn't go to his bedroom. He remained where he was, staring out over the courtyard. He wasn't tired—his mind was too full of questions to be sleepy. As he contemplated, his eyes fell on the conference building in the very center of the courtyard. Its bulbous, mushroom-shaped body seemed dark despite the sunlight. It was empty. Just a few weeks ago, the mastrells had met there every day to discuss the workings of the Diem.

Now the building seemed more like a tomb, a cairn dedicated to the bodies of those who were still drying in the sun out on the *kerla*. No one would hold conference in it for a while.

Of course, it hadn't always been a conference chamber. Perhaps now that the mastrells were dead, it would revert to its original purpose. Few people even remembered what it had once been used for…

Kenton looked up, noticing a movement below. An acolent, staying up late? But, no, it wasn't wearing sand master white. Kenton felt himself tense—what if Ais was wrong? What if he had lied to put Kenton off guard? Maybe the assassins would return tonight.

The form stepped out into the light, and Kenton was surprised to realize he recognized it.

"Elorin?" he asked with surprise.

"I felt guilty," the older man explained, accepting a cup of chilled juice from Kenton. "I abandoned the Diem. I… I shouldn't have done that, no matter my personal pain. I realized that when I heard you had returned."

Kenton sat down in the chair across from Elorin. His room still showed signs of the attack—the toppled table, bloodstains on the sand floor, an arrow sticking from the desk in the other room. Kenton didn't pay attention to the damage, however. He couldn't help smiling as he looked at the squat Elorin. Suddenly, life looked a lot brighter.

"Where did you go?"

"South, to my home village," Elorin explained. "I didn't even arrive, though. I couldn't go back, after all this time, after what I had become… So, I came back."

"We're glad to have you," Kenton said warmly. Though the mastrells had ruled the Diem, Elorin had always been the one who ran it. He organized the acolents, assigned duties to the middle ranks, and saw that the mastrells' will was carried out.

Elorin looked down shamefully. "Kenton… Lord Mastrell, you heard that…"

"Yes, I heard," Kenton said quietly. "Your power is gone."

Elorin nodded, pain in his eyes.

"That doesn't matter, Elorin," Kenton assured. "You're still a sand master as far as I'm concerned. I would rather have you back than a dozen mastrells."

Elorin blushed. Then he looked up, his wise eyes searching Kenton's. "You've… changed, Kenton. It's only been a few weeks, but you've changed."

Kenton sighed, taking a sip of his juice. "It seems like so much longer, doesn't it?"

“Infinitely longer,” Elorin agreed.

Kenton smiled. “So much has happened, but, well, I can’t help thinking we’re bound to succeed now that you’re here. Tell me, you’ll resume your duties in the Diem, won’t you?”

“If you command, Lord Mastrell,” Elorin said with a bow of his head.

“Please, Elorin, you know you don’t need to act that way around me.”

“I know, Lord Mastrell,” Elorin said quietly. “But, well, that is who I am.”

Ah Elorin, Kenton thought, *so docile before authority. I wonder how many people realize how truly strong you are on the inside.*

“I understand Elorin,” Kenton praised. “Please, get some sleep. Tomorrow I’ll announce your return—I doubt I will be the only one who is glad to see you.”

Elorin nodded, finishing his juice then rising. “Thank you, Lord Mastrell. Please, sleep in safety.”

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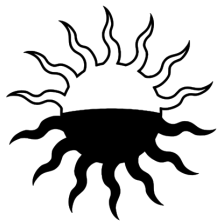

Kenton unlatched the bottom of the pole, releasing the tripod legs. He dug these into the sand, then rotated the box on the top of the pole, lining up the first of its sights with the moon, which hung in about sixth-hour position to the south.

Kenton bent down beside the pole, delicately maneuvering the box's first sight until it exactly overlaid the moon. Then he locked the instrument's controls and checked the compass on the sunmap's side. It pointed due north, toward the pole, which lay somewhere in the northern Border Ocean. He measured the exact time of day, then spun the top of the pole, moving it to compensate for the moon's position.

The second sight raised higher in the air than the first. By crouching down beside the sunmap, one could look past the second sight's angles pointer up into the sky. When the second sight exactly overlaid the sun, they would be at their destination—the place where Reegent's aides said he planned to go hunting. Kenton hoped the aides were right—with no landmarks besides the sun and the moon, searching in the *kerla* was nearly impossible. If Reegent weren't at the coordinates specified, there would be no point in looking for him. Not only would it be futile, but one could easily wander onto deep sands.

"We need to go another two degrees east," Kenton explained.

“And about a half a degree south.”

Eric nodded, shading his eyes as he looked toward the sun. “I’ve always wondered if the Kershtians can really find their way without a sun-map.”

Kenton began to pack the sun-map, careful not to bend either of the wires holding the sighting hoops. “I doubt the ones who live in Lossand can. Their cousins in the *kerla*… maybe. Does it matter?”

“I suppose not,” Eric said, following Kenton down the side of the dune toward their mounts.

Kenton had to admit, despite his arguments against the mastrells’ flagrant use of power, having the golden sash was proving extremely useful. Ais waited at the base of the dune with their three rezalin, the fastest—and most expensive—sandling mounts on dayside. The creatures had two enormous legs in the back, limbs so large that the knees rose high into the air, far above the rest of the creature’s body. The front legs were short and powerful, and the creature stood at a sharp decline, its neckless head nearly touching the sand.

As long as maneuverability wasn’t an issue, a man riding a rezal could travel a dozen times faster than one on a tonk. The creatures needed several days to rest to store energy before-hand, but if they were rested they could run non-stop for nearly twelve hours. Kenton had only ridden a rezal one time in his life, and that had been as a child visiting a fair. His mother had paid twenty lak for a ten-minute ride. Now he could commandeer one with barely a whim.

Don’t get too used to it, Kenton, he told himself as he stuffed the sun-map into the rezal’s packs. *This wastefulness is exactly one of the things you’re trying to change.* Of course, this was an emergency. He couldn’t afford the week’s travel it would take to reach deep sands by tonk.

He climbed into the rezal’s saddle—a strange sand-padded contraption that sat on the creature’s inclined body. First he put his feet in their places beside the creature’s head, then swung his body up onto the saddle. The position was like a reclining stand. Once he was in, he reached over and very carefully strapped himself in—riding a rezal could be dangerous without support.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Yes,” Ais said simply.

“Sure,” Eric called from behind. “Wake me when we get there.”

Kenton snorted. The comment was facetious—it would be nearly impossible to sleep atop a rezal’s bouncing, rushed gait.

Taking a breath, Kenton lightly gave two taps at the side of the rezal’s head with his feet, ordering it to move. The creatures only knew three speeds: stop, walk, and insane gallop.

The creature jumped forward, its mighty hind legs throwing up sand as it moved. Kenton’s head slammed back against his headrest, and he gritted his teeth against the jostling. The creature jumped up to the top of a nearby dune in a single leap, then proceeded to move in the direction Kenton had indicated, hopping from the top of one dune to another. Part of a rezal’s incredible speed came from the fact that it often ignored valleys between dunes. Of course, that speed came at a cost—it was difficult to find a more uncomfortable ride.

As the creature sped across the sand, Kenton carefully tapped it with his feet, angling toward the southeast. Two degrees travel would take a man walking about four hours to cross—a third of a day. The rezal would make it in about a fourth of an hour.

Kenton still wasn’t certain what he would say to Reegent. The Lord General was a harsh, formal man who hid a horrible temper under his disciplined exterior. Unlike most Taishin, Reegent had known what he would become one day. As a child Reegent had been groomed for his eventual position—and, unlike Eric, he had accepted it gladly. He strongly believed that nobility was an inborn trait, that the Sand Lord intentionally sent his chosen to the families of the rich. He was also a strict disciplinarian—a trait that had always put him and Kenton at odds.

For the hundredth time, Kenton wondered if it had been a good idea to bring Eric with him. Not only did Reegent blame Kenton for Eric’s disappearance, the Lord General was known to grow livid at the mere mention of his son’s name. What would he do when Eric suddenly appeared after three years without communication?

Somehow, he suspected that next to Reegent, even Ais would look friendly.

“That’s them, all right,” Eric agreed, looking down at the expansive series of tents and pavilions. “Father likes to travel with plenty of

attendants." He paused, then looked over at Kenton. "Have you ever been on a deep sandling hunt before?"

"Me?" Kenton asked, shaking his head. "Never."

Eric snorted. "You're in for an interesting time."

"Barbarity," a cool voice said behind them.

"What?" Kenton asked, looking toward Ais. The trackt had barely said a single word during the entire trip.

"This is the Sand Lord's holy place, *Ry'Kensha*," Ais explained, sitting unstrapped in his saddle. "Men don't live in the Deep Sand; it is a place for the Sand Lord's grandest creations. It should not be a place of hunting."

Kenton paused for a moment, looking over the white expanse. It didn't seem any different from the *kerla*. The dunes looked a little larger—but that could have been an optical illusion. In the very far distance he could see a herd of wild tonks grazing. It looked pastoral, not dangerous. Yet this was the most feared place on all of dayside.

"Come on," he mumbled, leading his mound down the side of the dune.

The Lord General's attendants and soldiers took note of them as they approached, calling out in surprise. However, the cries quickly turned to ones of welcome as some of the soldiers recognized him.

"You're popular," Eric noted with confusion as several of the soldiers called Kenton by name.

Kenton shrugged. "I had to have someone to spar with once you left," he said, gesturing toward the sword at his waist.

"A sand master visiting the Hall?" Eric said incredulously.

"Sparrings are open to anyone who wants to come," Kenton replied, nodding to a man he knew.

"Yes, but… a sand master?" Eric was still disbelieving.

"Kenton!" a voice shouted. Kenton turned with a smile—he recognized that bellow.

"Big Head!" he yelled back, waving to a soldier who was jogging out from underneath a canopy. The man was of medium height, but was extremely broad of chest. As wide as his body was, however, it still seemed disproportionate to his one other overwhelming feature—his enormous head.

"What did you call me!" the man yelled back.

“Nothing, Gremt!” Kenton called back.

The large solder hustled forward, a broad smile on his face. “We’ve missed you at sparrings, Kenton,” he said as he got closer.

“Well, Gremt, I was kind of indisposed,” Kenton replied with a chuckle.

Gremt laughed, slapping Kenton on the shoulder. “I’m glad you made it, lad. You’re the only one in that lot that was worth saving.”

Kenton smiled back. Gremt was one of Reegent’s generals—the only man in recent history to rise all the way to the rank from the lowly station of footman. As such, he was the only general in the Tower who wasn’t also a *Kelzi*. When Kenton had first decided to try sparring at the Tower, Gremt had been the only one willing to fence with him. It took a man who had been forced to deal with prejudice all his life to see past Kenton’s sand master robes and to the man inside. Once Gremt had accepted him, the rest of the Tower—the regular soldiers at least—had been easy.

“Now, who’ve you brought…” Gremt trailed off, looking closely at Eric. He rubbed at his clean-shaven face for a moment. “Sands, boy, you look just like…” His eyes opened wide with shock.

“Hello, Gremt,” Eric said ruefully. “How’s Mekal?”

“Aisha!” Gremt swore, jumping. “It is you!”

“Last I checked,” Eric mumbled.

“Does…”

“The Lord General know?” Kenton asked. “I don’t think so. Is he here?”

Gremt nodded toward a pavilion on the far side of the camp’s half-dozen tents. “Over there. But…”

Kenton and Eric ignored Gremt’s hesitancy. Eric held Kenton’s eyes for a moment, then gave an almost imperceptible nod. This was why he had returned to dayside. Regardless of his desires to help his friend, travelling with Kenton was only a vehicle—Eric had realized that in Kenton’s attempts to save the Diem, he would eventually have to visit the Lord General.

The two nodded to Gremt, then walked toward the Lord General’s pavilion. Ais trailed along behind, a silent observer.

The pavilion was without walls—a shaded area where the Lord General could wait while his men searched out sandlings to fight. A few hundred feet in front of the pavilion a bright red line of flags

marked the loose beginning of the deep sands—the place were water vines could no longer be found.

Reegent himself sat on a carapace and cloth chair, watching men in the distance as they ran a heard of tonks across a flat plain of sand. Bait for the creatures underneath. Kenton wasn't interested in that hunt, however—his quarry was much closer.

The Lord General was tall and distinguished, even when he was sitting down. His Lossandin brown hair was speckled with gray, his jaw outlined with a short beard. Instead of *Kelzi* robes, Reegent wore his Tower uniform—a tight, long-sleeved tunic with a robe-like skirt underneath. His formal cape, died red, marked him as a member of the Hall, and his wide, gold-trimmed belt proclaimed him the Lord General.

Kenton and Eric approached from the side. Reegent took his eyes off the tonk-herders at the sound, then his eyes opened wide with surprise. Kenton held his breath, not knowing what kind of reception to expect.

"Lord Mastrell!" Reegent said, a smile on his face. He rose, arms outstretched. "You surprised me!"

Kenton paused, words frozen on his lips. Annoyance he had expected, anger projected, but acceptance? He immediately became suspicious. He mouth opened to release a barb, something along the lines of 'I know you came here to try and avoid me.' However, he paused again.

What was it Khriss said? That I needed to be more diplomatic? Diplomacy had never gotten him anywhere—only flagrant hostility had been useful before the mastrells' arrogance. But, if the Lord General was prepared to treat him like an ally, perhaps he should try to be more reserved.

"I realize you came here to enjoy yourself," Kenton said instead of a retort. "I apologize for interrupting your vacation time."

"I appreciate the sentiment," Reegent said with a nod, gesturing toward a chair. "Please, take a seat."

Kenton complied. Eric, however, remained standing—something he obviously intended to do until his father addressed him. Reegent, however, turned away from Eric, looking at Kenton instead. "The deep sand is quite a trip from Lossand, Lord Mastrell," he said formally. "I am impressed by your dedication in finding me."

“Thank you, Lord General.”

“How are things in Kezare?”

“Well, My Lord,” Kenton replied.

Reegent turned away from Kenton, looking back across the deep sands. “It promises to be a fruitful hunt,” he explained. “Already we’ve made several catches. Have you ever watched a deep sand hunt before?”

“No, My Lord,” Kenton said, beginning to feel frustrated. He had little patience for such talk—he had an issue he wanted to pursue with Reegent. The Lord General obviously knew why Kenton was here, yet, the man spoke of completely irrelevant things. It was just this sort of topic-dodging that annoyed Kenton. Yet, he held himself back. He couldn’t afford to make this man an enemy.

So, he chatted with Reegent. They discussed the sandstorm that had been threatening one of the eastern Rim Kingdoms. They talked about Kenton’s favorite flavors of *ZaiDon*. They even discussed favorites in the Kezare boat races. Kenton suffered it all with barely-controlled exasperation.

“I hear you have been sparring with the Tower’s solders, Lord Mastrell,” Reegent said conversationally, motioning for a servant to bring Kenton another cup of juice.

“It has been very helpful to me, My Lord,” Kenton replied. “A wise man makes certain he’s never trapped in battle with only a single option of attack.”

“A true statement, Lord Kenton,” Reegent agreed. “Additional skills can be of much service to a man, especially when he finds himself in need of changing Professions.”

Kenton frowned. That sounded suspiciously like an invitation to begin talking about important issues.

“Actually, Lord Reegent,” Kenton began. “That is why I came to find—”

He was interrupted by a sudden yell from ahead. Reegent looked up with interest, squinting out across the sands. A man stood atop a dune, waving a red flag.

“They’ve found something!” the Lord General said enthusiastically. “My Hammer!”

An attendant rushed up, bringing with him a massive steel hammer. Reegent accepted it, then turned to Kenton. “We should

continue this discussion, Lord Mastrell. Would you care to accompany me on the hunt?"

"Me?" Kenton asked with surprise.

"You came all the way out here. You might as well see what a hunt is all about," Reegent said, nodding for a soldier to bring over a couple of mounts. Only two—he was continuing to ignore Eric.

Kenton shot a look at Eric, but his friend had finally turned away, walking toward the back of the tent, his face unreadable. Kenton looked back at Reegent. He wasn't certain what the Lord General was offering, but he doubted he could afford to miss the opportunity.

"All right, My Lord," Kenton said uncertainly. He caught Ais's eye as he made the comment. The Kershtian was not pleased—of course, when was he? Regardless, Kenton doubted the trackt would follow him onto the deep sands.

"Good," Reegent said with a nod, climbing atop his mount.

Kenton followed hesitantly. He'd never had the chance to ride a terha, the favored sandling of warriors. The creatures were large—a few feet taller than a tonk, with enormous trunk-like legs. The legs were like pillars, the shoulders rising about a handspan above the terha's squareish body. The head had two spikes extending forward from each side, and the entire body was covered with carapace plates several times thicker than those of a tonk. Of course, the true advantage of a terha was its water resistance. From infancy, the creatures' bodies were doused monthly with *DoKall*, making their shell impossible to dissolve.

Kenton climbed onto the beast, his movements tentative. The creature bore him with apparent lack of interest—Kenton's weight barely seemed to make a difference to it.

"You can use the tonk hammer, if you wish," Reegent said, nodding toward a hammer hanging from Kenton's saddle.

Kenton nodded gratefully. Most soldiers controlled their mounts by means of metal knee-plates, which they tapped against their terha's sides. Kenton, however, had no experience with such methods of control.

The Lord General tapped his terha forward, and Kenton followed with a quick hammer. The beast moved smoothly, its post-like legs rising and falling with an even gait. The terhan moved much more

quickly than a tonk, though they weren't as fast as a rezal—of course, few things were. They left the tent complex, heading toward the red flag in the distance.

"Have you ever been to deep sand before, Lord Mastrell?" Reegent asked, positioning his mount beside Kenton's.

"Yes, My Lord," Kenton replied. His fight with the creature at the end of the mastrell's path was still vivid in his mind.

Reegent raised an eyebrow—he hadn't been expecting that answer. "Then you know what to expect," he assumed.

Kenton chuckled. "I wouldn't say that, Lord Reegent," he replied. "My experiences were brief, at best. I've been near deep sand several times, but have never actually stood upon it."

Reegent nodded. "Then I shall warn you, it isn't what you think it is."

"What do you mean?" Kenton asked.

"The stories aren't exactly accurate when it comes to deep sandlings," Reegent explained.

"You mean deep sandlings aren't as large as people think?" Kenton asked. He had read many books on the deep sand, and all of them agreed that deep sandlings were huge.

"Oh, they're big," Reegent agreed. "But, well, you'll see. Let's just say that with the vines gone, sandlings are allowed to grow—just not always in the way everyone assumes."

Kenton considered the comment with a frown. The great determining factor of the sands—that which ultimately declared what was 'deep sand' and what was not—was the vines. Dorim vines, with their lack of predators, dominated the *kerla*. And, since the vines criss-crossed every ten feet or so, sandlings couldn't grow very large lest their movements begin snapping vines and release the deadly water inside. So, most sandlings in the *kerla* couldn't get much bigger than four or five feet long—unless they were a surface-dwelling race, like the tonks.

The deep sand was different. Dorim vines required a few hours of basking in sunlight each day to survive—though, like most dayside plants, they had to retreat beneath the sands for the rest of the day, lest they dry out. However, the vines also had to have a source of water—and that source lay somewhere far beneath the surface. Therefore, the vines had to stretch all the way from the

rocks below to the surface above. The vines could not survive in areas where this distance was too great. Such areas were called deep sand, and there the sandlings could grow to unchecked sizes.

Kenton watched the marking flag approach, both intrigued and apprehensive. They crested the hill, following a path marked by hundreds of footprints. Reegent's soldiers probably ran a herd of tonks over the path frequently to make certain nothing was hiding underneath. As they moved forward, Kenton began to notice something.

In the *kerla*, one rarely saw sandlings larger than tiny bugs. Human populations had domesticated most of the surface-dwelling sandlings, and hunted the underground predators. A few minutes after passing into the deep sands, however, Kenton began to notice life. It wasn't difficult—signs were plentiful.

In fact, he could pick out several places where sandlings must be hiding. He could see areas where the sand churned with motion, often showing flashes of carapace and shiny black legs. Enormous patches would seem to boil, indications of the huge creatures that were hiding below. What appeared still and empty at a distance was actually in near-constant motion, and Kenton found himself looking around with anxious eyes, catching flashes of movement in the corners of his eyes.

Reegent chuckled. "I warned you, Lord Mastrell."

"They're everywhere!" Kenton said apprehensively.

Reegent nodded.

"Why don't they… attack?"

Reegent laughed, then reached over and grabbed a spear from the sheath on the back of his mount. He took aim, and threw it directly into the middle of a churning spot a short distance away. The pocket of movement broke apart—scattering in all directions.

Kenton gasped, finally understanding. "They're not individuals—they're groups!"

Reegent nodded. "When people visit the deep sands, they see the sand agitate around them, remember the stories, and assume they're about to get attacked. So they run. They never realize that what they're seeing isn't a single monster, but thousands of tiny ones."

Kenton frowned. "But, they can't all be this small," he objected.

"Oh, they aren't," Reegent assured. "There are some big ones to

be found—otherwise, I wouldn't be here. But, they're far more rare than people assume—especially the dangerous ones. Even schools of sandlings that large can only support a limited number of predators."

Kenton nodded to himself, watching the sandlings regroup around Reegent's spear. It shook slightly as several unseen bodies took bites at it, to see if it was food. *They come to the surface to feed,* Kenton realized. *That's why there are so many of them. The sand goes down for hundreds and hundreds of feet, but the food is at the surface—or, at least, the food that isn't other sandlings.*

Kenton looked closely, searching for signs of digested sand. Most of the smaller sandlings were herbivores that grazed on sand. Sand that passed through a sandling's body changed from dusty bone-white to a more crystalline, clear color. The whiteness soon returned as the sand recharged in the sun—Kenton had never understood the difference between a sandling eating sand, which turned it clear, and pouring water on the sand, which turned it black.

Here, there were plenty of patches of digested sand—far more than he had ever seen in the *kerla*.

"Now, those are what you have to watch for," Reegent said, pointing toward what appeared to be an ordinary patch of sand.

"What?" Kenton asked. "I don't see anything."

"Look closely," Reegent urged.

Kenton did so, leaning forward. Then he noticed it, a small triangular piece of carapace sticking out of the sand.

"What is it?"

"DelRak Naisha," Reegent explained.

"What!" Kenton said with surprise. DelRakin were among the most feared of deep sandlings.

"Don't worry," Reegent said with a chuckle. "It won't attack. DelRakin hide beneath the sand—they aren't hunters, they just wait for something to step on them, and they snap closed on it. They're harmless if you know what to look for. Here," Reegent grabbed another spear, took aim, and let it fly.

The spear hit, and immediately the sand burst, three ten-foot long claws snapping closed. The end result was what looked like a warped pyramid sitting on the sand. The carapace claws—or,

actually, they were more like legs—fit together almost exactly, closing the spear inside of them. Slowly, however, the legs unfolded, revealing a small square head on a long spindly neck. Apparently, the head rested at the base of the legs, where it could tear at its prey while the arms held it trapped.

"It's mad for missing the meal," Reegent explained with a chuckle.

"It's fascinating, My Lord," Kenton replied.

Reegent nodded. "That it is. But, I doubt you came here to discuss sandlings."

Kenton perked up. *Finally!* "You are correct, Lord Reegent. I have more important concerns."

"Well, then, I suppose we should discuss business. What are your demands, Lord Mastrell?"

Kenton frowned in confusion. "Demands?" he asked uncertainly. "I don't believe I'm in a position to make demands."

Reegent laughed. "Don't play with me, Lord Mastrell. I know what you want. Tell me, what has Reven offered you?"

Reven. The name sounded familiar—it was Talloner, which meant… "King of Seevis?" Kenton asked slowly. Seevis was one of the larger rim kingdoms. What was Reegent talking about?

"I have to admit, Kenton, your move surprised me—I acknowledge its brilliance." As Reegent spoke, he dropped his overly-accepting expression. His words didn't become hostile, by any means, but they were more frank. His friendliness had been an act all along—but why? Why had he been trying to convince Kenton he was an ally?

"We hoped to move before any of the other countries knew what we were doing," Reegent was saying. "We wanted to take care of the mastrells before anyone had a chance to try and influence them. The rest of the city didn't even know about our plans to dissolve the Diem. But, your two weeks has ruined that, hasn't it? So, tell me now, Lord Mastrell. How much will it cost me to hire you?"

"You want to hire the sand masters?" Kenton asked slowly.

"Well, not all of you, of course. That would defeat the purpose of destroying the Diem. Just enough of you so that everyone knows the Tower now has the power of sand mastery. Trust me, I will pay you more than any of the Rim Kingdoms. Besides, you wouldn't

want to betray your homeland, would you?"

He must have gotten word of Drile's dealing, Kenton realized, *and he thinks I'm part of it.*

Slowly, Kenton began to piece together what Reegent must have been thinking. If the Diem were destroyed, but some of sand masters joined the Tower, then Reegent would add some of the Diem's historical power, and prestige, to his own Profession. Even with Praxton gone, Reegent still wasn't the most powerful of the Taisha—Vey and Heelis were just as influential. But, the people of Lossand feared the sand masters almost as much as the Kershtians did. There was a reason that the Diem had been the smallest, yet arguably most influential, of the Professions. If Reegent could capture a bit of that power for himself…

Kenton snorted. "You work to destroy us because we've grown too powerful, then you seek to seize that power for yourself?"

"All politics is founded in hypocrisy, Kenton," Reegent responded with a frown. "Do not let our personal differences destroy your chances. I have decided to ignore my own feelings regarding you in the interest of mutual benefit. I assumed that you came to the same conclusion. Is that not why you were looking for me today?"

"I hate to ruin a theory, Reegent," Kenton replied—if the man could ignore titles, then so could Kenton. "But I intend to save the Diem."

"Nonsense!" Reegent sputtered. "Surly you're not such a fool."

"I'm afraid I am," Kenton said with a rueful smile. "The reports you heard of mastrells dealing with the Rim Kingdoms involved another sand master, not myself."

Reegent frowned, rubbing his beard. "Then this entire conversation has been a waste," he said.

"Not a waste, Reegent," Kenton said. "It's proven that we can get along if we want to. We don't need to be enemies."

"I've never tried to hide the fact that I don't like you, boy," Reegent said sharply. "You're too impetuous, too insubordinate. Now you throw away perhaps the best deal your miserable Profession is going to receive. I don't see any grounds for agreement there."

"Surely we can come to some arrangement," Kenton assured.

“I already offered one to you, boy,” Reegent returned. “The sand masters have outlived their usefulness. Either you join with me, or you loose yourselves completely.”

Despite the harsh words, Kenton felt himself smile. This was the argument he’d expected to have. *Well, Khriss, so much for diplomacy,* he thought ruefully. *Now it’s time to try my way.*

“Reegent, you defeat your own arguments,” Kenton shot back. “You say that sand mastery has outlived its usefulness, but at the same time you scheme to make it your own. You know its power, and you’re afraid of it. You tell me to do what is best for Lossand, yet all you want is what is best for yourself.”

Reegent’s face grew red. “How dare you!” he bellowed. “I care nothing for sand mastery’s power. It has none! The Diem’s only influence comes from ignorance—it has convinced the people that it is some source of mystical omnipotence. What would they think if they knew what sand mastery really was?”

“Which is?” Kenton asked.

“Practically nothing. What good is the ability to jump a little bit? You can throw sand at people, but what good is that in a battle? Perhaps you could blind a man for a few seconds. The people and their stupid Kershtian priests fear you, but you are really no better than street charlatans.”

I’ll show you what good sand mastery is in a battle, Kenton thought angrily. However, he held himself back. Using his abilities against Reegent would be going too far—the Lord General would never support him if he did that.

“You say sand mastery is no good, Reegent,” Kenton countered. “But you don’t mean it. Otherwise you wouldn’t be so eager to bring me under your control.”

“I want your prestige, boy. Your name. Your power might be useless, but your reputation is not. However, I’ve changed my mind. I’d rather see you destroyed than have you anywhere near the Tower.”

“But you admit our influence,” Kenton shot back. “Wouldn’t it be of more use to you as a Profession? You try to destroy us instead of helping us. You should be more concerned with the future—an allegiance with the Diem in our time of need wouldn’t be quickly forgotten.”

Reegent snorted. “I’ve found that sand masters have incredibly short memories, boy.”

“But we could—”

“Enough!” Reegent snapped. “I have no more time for this. Good day.”

Suddenly, Reegent’s terha began to walk more quickly, its post-like legs pounding into the sand as moved into a gallop. Angrily, Kenton hammered at his own mount, trying to get it to move more quickly. Unfortunately, it appeared as if the creature only responded to some hammer-commands—it refused to move more quickly. Kenton cursed, realizing that most of the terha’s abilities couldn’t be accessed unless one knew the knee commands.

Reegent sped on ahead, leaving Kenton behind. Kenton slowed his own beast with a sigh, stopping it atop a dune. The debate had gone about as he could have expected—except for Reegent’s desire for sand mastery’s influence. Kenton was going to have to come up with some better arguments.

Well, I guess my way wasn’t any more effective than diplomacy, Kenton though with a sigh. He moved to turn his mount around, to head back to the camp where he could prepare for another conversation. As he glanced ahead, however, he paused. He saw several men standing atop the next dune looking down at something.

Curious, Kenton hammered his terha forward. As he crested the final dune, he finally caught sight of the creature Reegent had been summoned to fight. It lay in a wide valley at the base of two gradually sloped dunes, surrounded by a dozen apprehensive soldiers. It was fairly large—perhaps ten feet long—with two massive, flat tails sprouting from its hindquarters. It resembled a large tonk—it had four legs, each one massive as a tree trunk, and a neck equally as wide, but much longer than a tonk’s. Its head looked like two enormous arrowheads placed one on top of the other, the edges of each razor sharp.

Kenton’s stomach churned as he saw it. The creature lay on its side, is carapace cracked and splintered from dozens of war-hammer strikes. Even from a distance, Kenton could hear its blood-gas hissing from its wounds, and its legs were moving feebly as it tried to rise.

They left it alive so he could kill it, Kenton realized, seeing Reegent climb off his terha and slide his war hammer from its sheath. The Lord General was getting too old to hunt himself, but he still wanted the prestige of the final blow.

As Reegent approached, the creature—Kenton thought it was called a KaRak—tried one final strike, snapping at Reegent with its triangular jaws. The Lord General easily dodged the blow, spinning to gather momentum as he did so, then slammed his hammer into the side of the creature's head. There was an audible crack, and the KaRak dropped to the sand, motionless.

He'll do the same to Diem, Kenton realized. *Our enemies have weakened us to the point of near death, and now Reegent will take the prestige of the final blow. This decision will be a historic one—these seven Taisha will be remembered as those who destroyed sand mastery.*

Kenton turned his mound, hammering it to follow the path back toward the camp. He hadn't even thought of the implications before—most Taisha were easily forgotten. Because there were eight of them, none of them dominant, it was difficult for any Taisha to distinguish himself. This entire council, however, would be famous for centuries to come.

Kenton shook his head. And all it would cost them was sand mastery.

As he rode back, he realized something was bothering him—something other than his conflict with Reegent. It was a totally random topic, but he couldn't shake it for some reason. Something from one of the books he had studied.

He frowned when he realized what it was. Something had been wrong with the KaRak. The creature had been too small. Its shape fit the description he had read—the pair of flat tails were a give-away—but the size was wrong. Far too small. Almost as if it were… a child.

From behind him, he heard the sound of men screaming. He snapped his head around in a sudden motion. Even from several dunes away, he could see the dark form rising into the sky. A very angry form with an arrowhead-shaped skull atop its large neck.

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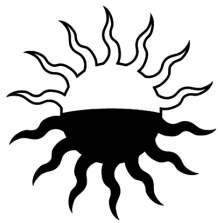

"N'Teese, what is deep sand?"

The girl looked up from the ground, where she had been scribbling on the Hall's black floor with a piece of chalk. "The sand is deep there, she explained."

Khriss sighed. "Yes, that much is obvious. I mean, why is it so dangerous?"

"There are monsters in the deep sand," N'Teese said, continuing her scribbling. Khriss assumed it was supposed to be a monster of some sort, though it looked more like a circle with lots of teeth.

"Monsters? What kind of monsters?"

"Big ones," N'Teese said with an authoritative nod. "Really big ones. Big enough to eat you in one bite."

Khriss frowned. "But, why would they want to eat you? Doesn't blood dissolve sandling carapace? Eating a person could be deadly.

N'Teese shook her head, turning away from Khriss. "You're weird," she declared, resuming her drawing. "Deep sandlings eat people because they do. Everyone knows that."

Khriss sighed, leaning her head back against the wall. She sat in the same room, on the same uncomfortable bench, as she had before. The very same elderly, balding administrator had told her to wait. This time, at least, she had Kenton's letter—the administrator wasn't certain if it would be enough to get her in to see the Lady

Judge, but he had promised to ask. So far, all Khriss had seen him do was move papers from one pile to another.

However, as annoyed as she was at being forced to wait a second time, she knew her true source of aggravation lay somewhere else. Kenton. Why had she let him talk her out of going with him? She had spent the better part of the night wondering just what these 'deep sands' were, and N'Teese's vague answers were only making her more curious. In addition, she wasn't certain she could trust Kenton to look after her interests—he didn't appear to think her hunt for Gevin was very important. He would probably forget to even ask the Lord General.

At least part of her sleepless night had been caused by sand mastery. Her scientifically trained mind still had trouble accepting what she had seen, and she had so many questions. Could Kenton control other objects, or just sand? And, if just sand, why? All work required energy—where did the power come to lift the sand into the air? How much sand could he lift, and for how long?

Unfortunately she knew from experience that she would have trouble finding answers to her questions. N'Teese didn't know anything about sand mastery, and she claimed few people did. Apparently, the sand masters were very clandestine about their abilities. She could try asking Kenton, but he didn't have much patience for questions. She doubted he would sit down and perform for her so she could make scientific observations.

I should have made him take me with him, she fumed. How had he persuaded her to stay behind? She had seen him talk to the Lord Artisan—he was hopeless as a diplomat. He should never have been able to persuade her of anything. Yet, as she considered, she realized that Kenton wasn't completely hopeless as a politician; he had one major talent. Arguing. She had made the mistake of getting angry at him, and when it came down to trading barbs, Kenton's true talent of persuasion manifest itself. That was why she had ended up sitting on the Hall's bench while he was out on the deep sands—whatever they were.

I should try being nicer, she decided. *It will completely baffle him.*

Suddenly, Khriss realized someone was approaching. She looked up with surprise, seeing that the administrator was about to address

her.

"The Lady Judge will see you now," N'Teese translated.

Lady Heelis's meeting room was different from the Lord Artisan's. While Rite's chamber had been relatively small, suited for quite business deals, the Lady Judge sat on a raised dais in a large hall. Dressed in deep black robes with a collar that went all the way up to the chin and sitting on a throne-like chair, Heelis looked more like a monarch than anything Khriss had seen on this side of the world.

"You only have a few minutes," the administrator explained through N'Teese. "The Lady Judge is in recess from a very important murder trial right now."

Khriss followed the old man's nod, noticing a Kershtian man held in chains a short distance away. Several groups of important-looking men were conferring with one another through the room.

A trial? Khriss thought with wonder. *I wonder was Acron would say about his primitive culture having such an advanced legal system—one with a woman at its head, no less.*

"I will be brief," Khriss assumed the minister, then strode forward to approach the Lady Judge's dais.

Heelis was older than Khriss had expected, a woman with wrinkled Lossandin skin. She had a wise face—the kind of face that reminded everyone of their grandmother and the words of wisdom she had once given. Khriss found herself curtseying despite herself—the Lady Judge and she were probably of about the same social rank, there was no need to show deference.

"Lady Judge," Khriss began, N'Teese translating, as usual, "I am the Duchess Khrissalla from the independent Kingdom of Elis."

"I have heard of you," Heelis replied. "You are the one travelling in the company of our new Lord Mastrell."

Travelling in the company of the Lord Mastrell? Khriss thought. *Well, I suppose I can't avoid the association. He did, after all, write the letter that got me in here.*

"The Lord Mastrell and I are fairly well acquainted," Khriss responded.

Heelis nodded. "Watch out for that one, child. He has surprised us all."

Tell me about it. "I will, Lady Judge. Since you have heard of

me, perhaps you know of my quest."

"Yes," Heelis said. "Rite mentioned it too me. You're looking for someone?"

"Prince Gevalden of Elis," Khriss clarified. "The son of our Kingdom's ruler, and my betrothed."

"Ah," Heelis said knowingly. "I'm sorry, child."

Khriss continued to ignore the 'child' references—a duchess of Elis, no matter what her age, was not a child. However, she was growing increasingly convinced that no one on this side of the world had a sense of proper decorum.

"I feel confident I can find him," Khriss said. "But, any help you could give me would be appreciated. Prince Gevalden came to Lossand to plead for aid. Elis is being threatened by a very powerful monarch, one who many say has supernatural powers. The stories of your sand masters led our prince to this side of the world. Please, tell me, when he arrived did he take the opportunity to introduce himself to you, Lady Judge?"

Heelis frowned. "When would this have been?"

"About two years ago, darkside time. Approximately five-hundred revolutions of the moon."

"Our years are similar," Heelis said, rubbing her chin. "Unfortunately, that is a very long time. I do not recall any meeting, but I may have forgotten. Larmen, do you remember such a meeting?"

The balding administrator shook his head. "You have never had an audience with a man by that name, My Lady," he replied.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, My Lady," he said, shooting Khriss a smile. "I spent the last hour checking through your audience logs."

"Then that is your answer, child," Heelis replied. "I am sorry, but if there is one thing we of the Hall excel at, it is paperwork. If Larmen can find no record of the meeting, then it did not happen."

Khriss forced herself to remain calm. It didn't mean anything—perhaps Gevin hadn't come to the Lady Judge. Maybe he had been forced to wait as Khriss had, and decided the meeting wasn't worth it. He might have gone straight to the sand masters, ignoring the other Taisha.

"I thank you for your time, Lady Judge," Khriss said, performing

a stiff curtsey.

"Child," Heelis said as Khriss turned to go. "Might I warn that you are going about this the wrong way."

"My Lady?" Khriss said with a frown.

"Most of the Taishin are very busy people," Heelis said with a kindly tone. "It is a sad truth that we have little time for individuals, especially those not of our Profession. Darksiders are welcome in Lossand, but because of language barriers and cultural differences, your people often find their way to the fringes of our society. Few Taisha even take notice of them. There is a person, however, who has taken it upon himself to care for the Lossand's forgotten."

"The Lord Beggar?" Khriss asked, remembering the scarred man she had met at Loaten's.

Heelis nodded. "While not, by Law, a true Taisha, Nilto is arguably as powerful as any of us. If there is a person in this city who has news of your man, it will be him."

"Thank you, My Lady," Khriss said, curtseying one last time—this time in gratitude, before leaving, Baon and N'Teese following.

Outside of the conference chamber, a black-uniformed trackt returned Baon's sword to him. Khriss shot the mercenary a smile as he strapped the sword back on—the daysiders had taken his blade, but unwittingly left the pistols.

"N'Teese," Khriss asked as they left the hall, "can you get me a meeting with the Lord Beggar?"

"I don't know," the little girl replied. "Maybe. I could ask Loaten—they're friends."

"Please, do so," Khriss requested. "Baon and I will return to the house for now. Come to me when you have an answer."

"My Lady, you are going to have to introduce me to this sand mage," Acron said as the cook put a plate of food in front of him.

"Acron, you already know him," Khriss said, shaking her head. "It's just Kenton."

"Yes," Acron said, "but now he's a sand mage."

"He was always a sand mage!"

"Personally, I must admit skepticism, my lady," Cynder confessed, accepting his own plate. They sat in the house's dining hall. The room had a comfortably small table with a large

chandelier, its limbs filled with grundlefish globes. The translucent fish were swimming near the bottoms of their spheres, watching the people below them with curious, animal eyes. The lunch consisted of sandwiches and brothwa soup.

"I would have thought you would appreciate the irony," Khriss said, trying one of the sandwiches. The flavor was… interesting. Instead of beef, which was extremely rare on dayside, the cook had substituted a smooth-textured form of *ZaiDon*.

"True," Cynder agreed with a chuckle. "We come all the way to Lossand to search for sand mages, only to find we were travelling with one the entire time. It is blessedly ironic. Still, you say they lift things with sand? You realize how… irregular that sounds, My Lady."

"Not irregular, Cynder," Khriss corrected. "It sounds ridiculous."

"That as well," Cynder agreed.

"I saw it too," Baon noted, standing against the far wall. He refused to sit with them, even when Khriss invited, but he did accept a sandwich from the cook as she passed.

"No offence intended to either of you," Cynder continued. "But honestly, flying sand? Is there no other explanation?"

"If you find one, I'll eagerly accept it," Khriss mumbled.

"Well, I still want to meet him," Acron insisted. With each passing day, the hefty anthropologist acquired more and more dayside paraphernalia. Today, he was wearing some sort of carapace medallion around his neck, as well as a full dayside outfit and a *DaiKeen* medallion that was carved from a shiny piece of stone—he now owned several varieties of all three. Khriss had hoped that sending the two professors to gather information in darkside town would curb Acron's spending, but so far her ploy had seen little success.

"Did you two find anything today?"

"Yes," Acron said eagerly. "This necklace. Isn't it exquisite? They say the carving is of a deep sandling, whatever that is."

"I meant about the prince," Khriss noted.

"Oh," Acron said, letting the medallion flop back against his chest. "No, not yet. But don't give up hope, my lady. I'm certain we'll find something sooner or later. We've only been here three days."

“We have discovered one thing, however,” Cynder said, patting his lips with a handkerchief. “Though it has little to do with the prince.”

“What?” Khriss asked, tasting her soup. It, at least, was very similar to the darkside equivalent. Apparently, the very same seaweed used to make it grew on the shores of dayside as well.

“Well, I’ve been asking about Dynastic border patrols,” Cynder explained. “And it appears that they don’t exist—at least, not to the extent the Dynasty would have everyone believe. Apparently, all of the darksiders in Kezare passed from one Dynastic province to another without ever noticing a single one of the infamous border guards. The rumor is that the Dynasty is sending so many troops to its war efforts that it can’t keep its borders patrolled anymore. Most people claim that there aren’t border guards at all—that the Dynasty keeps its provinces segregated more through threat than actual manpower.”

Khriss frowned. “That’s nonsense. We ran into a border patrol, after all. If there weren’t any guards, then who killed captain Deral?”

“True, My Lady,” Cynder said with a nod. “I am just passing on what I have heard.”

Khriss finished her soup in thought. Cynder was right about one thing—most of the Dynasty’s power came from the fear Scythe and his predecessors had managed to instill in those they dominated. Much of the Dynasty had been controlled for so long that the people didn’t even consider travel an option.

“Acron, you’re the one who has traveled the most,” Khriss said. His work as an anthropologist required that he visit other cultures, and so when Elis was able to secure Dynastic travel permits, he was one of those who usually got to leave the country. “What did you think of Dynastic border security?”

Acron looked up. “My Lady?” he asked. He appeared distracted for some reason, a strange look on his face.

“Security, when you traveled in the Dynasty. How strict was it?”

Acron shrugged. “All I saw were the formal check stations,” he said. “My travel was legal, so I didn’t have to worry about border patrols.”

Khriss shook her head. First they find out that Dynastic

blockades are easy to avoid, now she learns that the border patrols are equally lax. Perhaps her escape to dayside hadn't been such a miracle after all. Of course, there was still the fact that she had lost two soldiers during the escape. If it was supposed to be so easy, why had they been so unfortunate? Pure luck?

Khriss sat back as the cook cleared the table. Cynder rose, walking toward the next room, followed by Baon. As Khriss rose to go, however, a pudgy hand pulled her aside. She turned to find Acron looking at her somewhat nervously.

"Acron?" she asked. "What is it."

"I . . I should tell you something, My Lady," he said, sweating anxiously. She had never seen the anthropologist so out of sorts.

"What is it?"

Acron paused, his eyes darting toward the next room. "Um, nothing, My Lady," he finally decided.

"Speak, Acron," Khriss ordered, somewhat surprised by the authoritarian tone to her own voice.

"Um, yes, My Lady," he said, capitulating. "It's just that, well… Do you remember the day Captain Deral died?"

Khriss nodded. "I remember being awakened by Baon. He had gone off with the captain and lieutenant to scout ahead while the rest of us got some sleep. He rode back into camp in a flurry, and warned us that the border patrol was near."

"Yes, well…" Acron continued. "I couldn't sleep that day. I don't know what it was, but when the rest of you set up camp and went to bed, I just sat in my tent thinking. Just before Baon rode into camp, I heard to pistol shots. Only two. They were in the distance, barely audible, but I did hear them. I swear it, My Lady. I'm not making this up, I heard them."

Khriss frowned. Two shots? What was Acron implying?

"There were only two," Acron continued. "Don't you see? Baon said the border patrol was chasing them, and shot the captain in the back. Shouldn't there have been more shots? And why didn't they shoot at Baon?"

"What are you implying, Acron?" Khriss asked.

"I don't know," the fat man admitted, rubbing his hands nervously. "It's just that… I've never been able to trust that mercenary since. I don't think he told us the truth that night."

“Baon, lie?” Khriss asked incredulously. “Acron, you’re worried for no reason. Perhaps the captain was shot further away, and the two shots you heard came from the patrol as it chased Baon.”

“Yes, of course, My Lady,” Acron agreed. “That must be it.” The overweight man smiled, though she could tell he wasn’t convinced by her explanation. He nodded to her anyway, and waddled toward the other room.

Oh, Shella, Khriss thought with frustration. *I don’t need this right now*. However, now that Acron had planted the seed, she couldn’t help but be a little suspicious herself. There definitely had been something strange about that night. Why had the captain and Baon suddenly decided to scout ahead together? Why hadn’t she noticed any sign of pursuit, despite Baon’s insistence that a border patrol had nearly found them? Once her curiosity had something to dig at, it wouldn’t let her simply ignore such questions.

With a sigh, she moved to join the others.

“He wants to see you,” N’Teese said. She didn’t bother with formalities or hellos, she just proclaimed her news as soon as she walked through the sitting-room door.

“When?” Khriss asked, sitting in one of the plush chairs beside the fire, sipping at her tea.

“Right now,” N’Teese informed.

“Now?” Khriss asked with surprise. “No waiting?”

“Well, you can probably wait if you want,” N’Teese said with a shrug. “If you want to meet him later, I could…”

“I’m coming,” Khriss said, nodding for Baon to follow. “You two,” she said to Acron and Cynder, “keep looking for information about the prince.”

“You want us to go out again?” Acron asked with a frown of displeasure, one mimicked in a less-exaggerated way by Cynder. The two had just decided to play a game of conquest on the sitting-room’s gameboard.

“Yes, again,” Khriss insisted. “We didn’t travel across the world to play games.”

She followed N’Teese out of the house and toward the nearest exit from darksider town. Soon they were back in the increasingly-familiar daylight, though Khriss could still only last a few minutes before she had to put on her glasses. She didn’t know how Baon did

it.

N'Teese led her to what had to be the most run-down, decrepit section of Kezare. It sat next to the market, but had none of its flamboyance or colors. The buildings here seemed to lean against each other, struggling to remain upright. Perhaps only the closeness of the walls—most of them built right against one another—kept them from collapsing. Of course, that meant that if one of them went, the rest probably would as well.

What alleyways there were appeared to be inhabited by slime-covered families, people who made roofs out of garbage and turned the narrow passageways into homes. Normal people passed through the streets with determined steps, trying their best not to look to either side, trying not to notice the lame, the poor, and the unfortunate huddled by the buildings.

N'Teese's path ended in a dirty corner between two tall buildings. Khriss wrinkled her nose at the smell of garbage and sewage. Inside, she could see several forms huddled beside a wall. N'Teese walked into the alley, and Khriss followed reluctantly, trying to step in places that were a little bit cleaner than the rest.

The huddled forms turned out to be a man with several hungry-looking children. Their house, if it could be called that, consisted of what looked like the shell of a sandling. A form in a brown robe stood stooped beside the father, mumbling quietly in a comforting tone. Nilto. He patted the father on the shoulder, and handed him a small bag of something, then stood.

"Let us go," he said in his hissing whisper of a voice, motioning for Khriss and N'Teese to follow him out of the alleyway. Khriss did so happily.

Nilto stopped when they reached the street outside, and once again Khriss was struck by the cruel deformity that was his face. His very bones seemed twisted and misaligned, his skin scarred and melted. He walked with a very pronounced limp.

"I sicken you so, woman of darkside?" He spoke in Lossandin, waiting for N'Teese to translate.

Khriss wasn't certain how to answer. "What makes you think that?" she asked with as much tact as she could manage.

"Your face," he responded, leaning down to take a seat on the rocky ground beside the building. "Sit."

“Here?” Khriss asked incredulously, eyeing the dirty floor.

“You requested an audience. Well, this is my office,” Nilto replied, waving a hand toward the streets. “If you want to speak with me, you will have to do it here.”

Khriss frowned again, carefully seating herself on the ground, trying not to imagine what she might be sitting on. She cleared her mind, however, *remember the prince*, she told herself. If this man could help her, then it was worth any injustice to speak with him.

As she took her seat, Nilto waved to a small boy waiting in a doorway nearby. The boy, covered with dirt and wearing no shirt, ran over to Nilto. The Lord Beggar whispered in his ear for a moment, then the boy took off, dashing away on some errand.

“Now,” Nilto asked, “why are you bothering me?”

Well, it appears he has manners to match his face, Khriss thought. “I have been sent to you by the Lady Judge. She seems to think you might be able to help me.”

“I doubt it,” the Lord Beggar hissed.

Khriss ground her teeth, trying to remain diplomatic in front of his hostility. “I am looking for someone,” she said. “A man from darkside.”

“And why would I care about a darksider?” the Lord Beggar demanded.

“I don’t know,” Khriss confessed. “But it appears that you are the one who keeps track of such things. Hs name was Gevalden, and he was a prince on darkside. A son of a very important person.”

“A *kelzi,* then?” Nilto asked.

“Something like that,” Khriss agreed.

Nilto nodded toward the beggars lining the street. “We have little use for *kelzi* here, woman of darkside. Besides, perhaps, what we might be able to take from them, should we manage to trap them in an alley somewhere.”

“You wouldn’t do that,” Khriss guessed.

“And why not?” the Lord Beggar demanded.

“Because,” Khriss said. “The people of this city seem to respect you—the Lady Judge spoke favorably of you. They look at you as a savior, not as a murderer.”

The Lord Beggar grunted. “I know nothing of your darkside prince, woman.”

Khriss's eyes thinned. The man was lying. She could see it in his eyes—or, at least, in the one that wasn't scarred shut. "Where is he?" she demanded.

The Lord Beggar smiled slightly. "What have you gone through to find this man? Can he really be worth the trouble?"

"I promise you, he is," Khriss shot back.

Nilto paused, looking up at the sky. Khriss followed his gaze, but couldn't find anything at its end. Nothing but the strange blue sky, void of stars.

"Gevalden of Elis is dead," the Lord Beggar finally said.

Khriss felt herself grow cold.

"He was barely alive when they brought him into the city," Nilto continued. "Something had happened on the sands, some sort of accident. I've been told he refused to die until he actually arrived in Kezare. He kept mumbling about sand wizards or something, and a kingdom on the other side of the world."

"You lie," Khriss shot back. However, this time she didn't believe her own words. There was something in Nilto's eyes—something chilling about the way he spoke.

"Loaten was the only one in darksider town who recognized him," Nilto continued. "He cared for Gevalden during the last days of his life. I don't know why I even cared. But, there was something about this man—something about the innocence in his face—that made me curious. Who was this man who had come across the world, dressed in his finery with dozens of attendants? Who was this individual who refused to die until he reached his goal? But, in the end, the sands took him like they take everyone."

Khriss blinked against tears that threatened to come. "You lie," she repeated.

The small boy had returned, carrying a cloth-wrapped package.

"Here," Nilto said, handing her the package. "These probably belong to you."

Inside were two things. A ring and a shiny silver pistol, well crafted with designs carved into its wooden hilt. Gevin's signet ring and his firearm. There were blood-stains on the hilt of the gun.

"Oh, Shella…" Khriss whispered despite herself.

"Why should you care so much for this one, woman of darkside," the Lord Beggar hissed. "Look around you. Dozens of

these people die each week, and do you think their families grieve any less for them? Who cares for the ones who aren't princes, who aren't important. No one. Your nobility sickens me, woman. Be gone with you. You've found your answers, now scurry back to your comfortable home. Hide like the creature of darkness that you are."

Khriss sat up stiffly, clutching the gun and ring to her chest. "I was wrong about you," she whispered back. "You are a horrible man."

"Oh, I know, duchess. I know." Nilto smiled.

Khriss tried to stand, slipping as tears began to well in her eyes. Baon, however, caught her on the arm and hoisted her to her feet. She stood there for a moment, stunned. She didn't want to move, she didn't want to think.

Gevin can't be gone, she insisted. *He can't…* Her feet refused to move.

Baon took her arm, leading her back toward darksider town. And as they left, the sound of Nilto's laughter chased them from behind.

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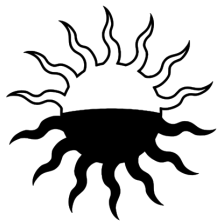

"You are a fool. What were you thinking he would do? Welcome you back with open arms?"

Eric paced in the sun, standing away from his father's tent.

"He ignored you. That's perfect. Neither of you have to deal with each other. Why are you so worried?"

Eric continued to pace.

"He disowned you. Your ties are cut. You can go back to darkside guilt-free and never have to even think of him again. What were you even thinking, coming back? You hate it over here. So bright, so hot and sticky… What a fool. You should—"

"What are you doing?"

Eric looked up with surprise. The Kershtian trackt, Ais, stood a short distance away.

"Were you talking to yourself?" Ais asked with a frown.

"Of course not," Eric said briskly, turning to stride away from the trackt. Were was Kenton, anyway? How long would it be before he realized Reegent was just playing with him? Eric knew his father, recognized the duplicity behind the man's smile. He didn't know why Reegent was acting kind, but he was fairly certain Kenton would not leave the deep sands with any kind of commitment from the Lord General.

Eric squinted, looking across the sands in the direction his friend

had gone.

"This entire trip was a waste," he mumbled with a frown. He thought he could hear something.

Men screaming…?

Kenton dashed over the top of the dune, calling his sand to life with a flash of light. Beyond he saw a sandling so enormous it made the creature at the end of the Mastrell's Path look tiny.

Legs large as buildings, a triangular head that could have swallowed ten men whole, a body that rose like a mountain out of the sand. Each step threw up a ripple of sand, scattering warriors holding tiny hammers. At least a dozen men lay half-buried by the wave sand that the creature's emergence must have produced.

Reegent was one of those half-buried. Even as Kenton watched, the Lord General tried to pull himself free of the dune that buried his lower half. His motions became more frantic as one of the creature's feet lifted, moving toward Reegent…

Kenton jumped into action, adrenaline and sand boosting his leap off the dune, propelling toward the battle at a horrific rate. He had to get close enough to grab Reegent with his sand.

Kenton landed beside a couple of soldiers who were scrambling away, dragging a wounded comrade. Kenton leapt again, spinning through the air toward the creature itself. One of the beast's tails roared through the air toward him, and Kenton pushed himself higher in the air to flip over the tail. At least fifty feet in the air now, Kenton let himself fall, the KaRak's second tail whipping over his head, the speed of its motion carrying so much wind in its wake that it created a miniature sand storm.

Kenton coughed in the sand, blinking his eyes clear as he plummeted toward the ground. He began to slow his decent, but then he noticed Reegent. The creature's leg was about to crush him.

Kenton shot his sand away from himself, hurling it toward the Lord General at a speed no other mastrell could ever have obtained. The sand flew like a spear, slamming into Reegent and grabbing him in its grip and ripping him free of the dune just as the KaRak's leg crushed the sand.

Kenton slammed into the ground, the impact making his vision flash with pain and he cried out, involuntarily loosing control of his sand. He shook his head, trying to regain his breath. Reegent, no

longer held by sand, dropped through the air, crashing to the sand about twenty feet away. The Lord General moved limply, his leg was twisted at an unnatural angle.

Kenton tried to stand, but collapsed back to the sand. The motion pointed his eyes upward, and he saw a sight terrifying enough that he lost track of everything else around him.

The massive sandling was looking at him. Its head lowered slightly, dark black eyespots focused directly on Kenton. Though the carapace was incapable of showing emotion, Kenton almost felt like he saw an expression on its inhuman face. Anger. Intelligent, vengeful, anger.

The KaRak lifted its tails, moving to whip them toward Kenton and the Lord General.

I can't lift us both! Kenton thought with alarm, forcing his sand back to life.

Suddenly, a black form fell from the sky, crashing to the sand beside Reegent. A black, triangular form with tall, powerful hind legs and small forefeet—a rezal.

Eric tumbled from the rezal's back, grabbing his father and throwing the still-moving form over his shoulder. Though he looked a little plump, Eric moved with the speed and reflexes of one trained for battle, quickly jumping back on the rezal and grabbing hold of its saddle. He shot Kenton a nod before snapping his foot against the rezal's head, sending the creature into a wild leap to the side. The rezal's hind quarters pushed off, shooting Eric and Reegent high into the air, narrowly missing the monstrous tail.

Kenton mimicked the rezal's actions, using his sand to propel himself to the side. The tail nearly crushed him, but he used his sand to push against the creature's carapace, giving himself extra leverage.

Kenton rolled to the side, the tail hitting the sand just a few feet behind him. He regarded it with amazement. He was missing something… something important.

His sand had touched the creature's carapace. It hadn't fallen stale.

Kenton cursed himself, gathering his sand around him. Recently so many things had been *terken*—the Kershtian assassins, the creature on the Mastrell's Path—that he had forgotten something

important. *Terken* sandlings were rare. Most of them were as susceptible to sand mastery as humans—more so, because they didn't have blood to wet the sand and make it stale.

Kenton smiled. He launched himself into the air as the KaRak lifted its tail for another swing. Kenton landed on the tail itself, running along its length, his sand steadying him on both sides. The creature turned toward him, it's arrow-like head focusing on him.

Kenton jumped again, putting all of his might behind the leap, hurling himself upwards. He shot through the air, wind rippling his robes, his hands clenched in fists before him. He brought his hands apart, pulling the sand away from his jump, moving it up to his sides instead. A ribbon surrounded each of his hands. As he flew toward the KaRak's head, he thrust his hands out, commanding the sand forward, driving a brilliant line directly at each of the creature's eyespots.

The monster's head snapped backward as the sand smashed through its carapace. Violent sprays of gas-blood spewed from the eyespots, like cries of pain from the otherwise silent creature. As Kenton began to fall he let out a yell of his own, gathering all three of his ribbons into one powerful disk beside his right hand. He swept his arm in an arc, spraying his sand out like a massive scythe, slicing through the creature's exposed neck.

Gas-blood ruptured from the wound, exploding outward so violently that it blew the KaRak's twenty-food wide head completely from its body.

Kenton spun as he dropped, landing lightly on the sand. The KaRak crashed to the ground behind him with a sound like a building collapsing. Its head slammed to the ground just to Kenton's right.

Two dozen warriors crouched spread across the sand before him, most of them wounded, some clutching ineffectual spears or hammers. All of them had stunned expressions on their faces.

Kenton walked forward, approaching Reegent, who sat beside Eric's mount. Kenton strode right up to the Lord General, then leaned down, placing his face just a few inches from Reegent's.

"And I'm considered one of the weak ones," Kenton informed.

"Ouch! Be careful you fools!" Reegent swore as the soldiers placed him down in his chair. The right side of his face was red and

quickly showing signs of bruising, and his right leg was broken. He was alive, however, which was more than could be said of about a dozen of his men.

Gone was the Lord General's diplomatic facade—now, more than a distinguished ruler, he seemed more like a grumpy old man. As he sat down, a healer inspecting his leg, Reegent shot a scowl at Eric, who stood at his side.

"I should have known this day would go wrong the moment you appeared, boy," he grumbled.

Eric just smiled. Apparently, getting cursed at was better than being ignored.

Kenton took a deep breath. He wasn't quite ready to let the Lord General free yet—their battle wasn't over. If the other Taishin could take advantage of the Diem because of its weakness, then Kenton could do the same to them.

"Stop whining, Reegent," Kenton snapped. "You're behaving like a spoiled child."

Reegent turned angry eyes Kenton's direction. "Happy to see me wounded, boy?" he demanded. "You were just waiting for something like this to happen."

"In a way, yes," Kenton shot back. "You implied that sand mastery was useless. I think you have ample evidence otherwise. I just wish twelve men hadn't had to die so I could prove it to you."

"Your help wasn't requested," Reegent grumbled.

"And if I hadn't been there today?" Kenton shot back. "You would be dead, Lord General. Don't even try to deny it. You, and quite possibly every man out there."

"Go ahead, sand master," Reegent hissed. "Gloat."

"This isn't gloating," Kenton informed, slamming his fist against a chair's armrest. "Sands, man. Your head is as thick as carapace!"

Reegent's face grew red. Then, something odd happened. He suddenly burst into laughter. "By the Sand Lord," Reegent mumbled, "you're like your father. He was the only one who ever had the nerve to speak like that to me."

Kenton blinked in surprise, uncertain how to take that remark. So, he just continued his argument. "I can see to it that if something like this happens again, you are prepared."

"How?" Reegent asked. He wasn't laughing any more, but he

wasn't as angry either.

"Two dozen sand masters," Kenton said. "Delivered to you the moment the Diem is reinstated. They will be yours to do with as you please—take them on hunts, use them to bolster your defenses, sands, you can have them move furniture for all I care. They'll be yours to command as you see fit."

Reegent rubbed his chin in thought.

"You wanted sand mastery's prestige," Kenton said. "Well, I'm offering you something far better. This is access to the true power of the Diem. That, plus the vow that sand masters will no longer be allowed to take what doesn't belong with them, is what I'm promising you in exchange for your vote."

Reegent paused. "What kind of sand masters?" he asked. "I don't want you just sending me all of your rejects."

"At least one mastrell," Kenton promised, "with supporting members, at least one from each rank."

"All right then," Reegent said. "Done."

Kenton stared forward, a little stunned that the Lord General had agreed. After all this time, he finally had his first firm commitment of support from one of the Taisha.

"Thank you," Kenton said simply.

Reegent snorted. "Boy, I just saw you cut the head off of a seventy-foot tall monster. I don't care what I have to do, that isn't the kind of power we can afford to cut free. As long as there's a Diem Profession, there will at least be some rules binding you people. Maybe the Diem wasn't created to be useful, but to keep sand mastery in check."

Rules, Kenton thought. *Yes, I'm growing to understand the same thing, Lord General.*

"Good day, then, Lord General. I hope your recovery is quick. Ais, Eric, are you coming?"

"Wait," Reegent requested. "Have you boys eaten yet?" he offered, trying not to look toward Eric. "My cooks will be fixing dinner shortly. You are welcome to stay."

Kenton shot Eric a look, then nodded with a smile. "We would appreciate it, Lord General."

Kenton strolled along the sands in front of Reegent's tents, smiling slightly. Behind him, he could still hear Reegent and Eric arguing. It

was a good sign—Eric had lived with the man for fifteen years, never once voicing his frustrations with his father. They would probably never get along very well, but at least they were talking. An opportunity Kenton would never get to have with his own father.

If I'm so much like him, then why do I feel like I never knew him? Kenton wondered, absently kicking up sand as he walked.

That was the one rule he was absolutely certain he would change—families would be allowed in the Diem. He had already laid the groundwork for destroying the ban by building steps up to the higher floors. He would probably still reserve the upper rooms for the mastrells—as much as his rebellious side hated to admit it, a system of ranks and authority in the Diem did make sense. Without the rules and traditions, the sand masters could easily have become a terror on the sands. He'd never realized that—all he'd been able to see was how the rules restricted him. How they held him back. Him, personally—a selfish view.

What kind of man had his father been? He had sent his family away, like was demanded of him, forcing them to live in town. But, at the same time, he had broken tradition by marrying a woman from darkside. Kenton knew what the other sand masters said about that decision—they said it had ruined all of Praxton's children.

Kenton's mother had loved Praxton, or so he assumed. She had always spoken highly of the Lord Mastrell, had been the dutiful wife during his visits. Of course, Kenton's mother had been a pragmatist. She knew that there was little chance of her supporting herself on dayside without a wealthy husband. She seemed happy with the arrangement—she had a nice house in Kezare's *kelzi* district, as much money as she could want, and plenty of time to raise her children. Of course, Kenton could remember catching her sometimes, looking out across the lake with a wistful look. Across the lake, toward the Diem. With difficulty, Kenton tried to imagine the romance that must have drawn the two people together—powerful sand master and independent woman from darkside.

Kenton paused, looking up. He had wandered far from the camp. If he wasn't careful he would find himself wandering onto deep sand. The red marker flags were just a few feet in front of him.

A sudden stillness seemed to flow across the sand. No sandling

rustled in the ground, no wind howled through the dunes. Kenton felt an irrational chill blow over him—even the sun seemed to grow darker for a brief moment. Slowly, he turned. There was a man standing behind him.

The Kershtian warrior, bare to the waist, stood quietly. The man carried a carapace spear lightly in his dark olive fingers, his forehead scarred with a stark white square. Two newer scars stood out beside the square. Assassin marks.

The two men stood staring at each other for a moment as the wind restarted, ruffling Kenton's robes and the Kershtian's skirt. This one was different than the ones the day before. He hadn't attacked from behind. He was calm, careful. He bowed his head once toward Kenton before snapping into motion.

Kenton ducked to the side, dodging the spear as it shot through the air. He knew, somehow, that the spear would be covered with a *terken* coating. Kenton called his sand to life anyway, then reached down for his sword.

The assassin moved quickly after his throw, however, tackling Kenton a second later. Kenton's sword spun from his unprepared fingers, tumbling down the side of the dune.

Kenton kicked free of the Kershtian as the man pulled a carapace knife free from a sheath on his leg. Kenton rose to his feet, his heart pounding. Gathering his sand around himself, he jumped, soaring high into the air.

The Kershtian scrambled forward and slapped his hand through Kenton's stream of sand. Immediately, the sand the man touched turned stale and black, destroying the foundation of Kenton's jump.

Kenton floundered in the air as his support was ruined, toppling back toward the ground. He tried to get his remaining sand to slow him, but the Kershtian once again threw himself into the stream, killing it. Kenton tumbled to the sand on the other side of the dune, rolling away from the camp, down the slope where no one would be able to see him.

The Kershtian followed, diving toward Kenton. Kenton barely managed to get his hands up in time to catch the knife hand before it plunged into his chest.

This man knows how to fight sand masters! Kenton thought with anger, barely holding the knife at bay. As long as the man

grappled Kenton, he could keep control of the battle, and Kenton's sand mastery would be practically useless.

Desperately, Kenton tried to use his sand. He touched his elbow to the ground, summoning another ribbon and using it to lift both he and his assailant into the air. However, he didn't have enough strength to lift two people very high, and the Kershtian quickly maneuvered a leg free and kicked at the stream, the gelled carapace on his skin killing the sand and toppling them both back down to the ground.

They rolled between the dunes, struggling for control of the knife. However, it was obvious who was more skilled in this form of combat. The Kershtian simply had more raw strength than Kenton. Before Kenton knew it, he was back in the same position as before, his back resting against the sand floor, the Kershtian on top of him, the knife inching toward his face.

Kenton turned his head to the side as the tip of the knife touched his nose. *Sands, he's strong!* He tried to call up further sand, but he was growing weak. His mouth burned from dehydration—controlling three ribbons was far more difficult than he was used to. The day's travel, battles, and sand mastery had sapped much of his energy and his water. He barely managed to call sand to life—he wouldn't have the strength to lift them both into the air again.

Then he saw it. A short distance away, a small beak of carapace jutted from the sand. Sand that was still and quiet.

With a cry of exertion, Kenton shoved his weight up and to the side, rolling the pair of them to the right. The move let the Kershtian's knife slip forward, and it sliced the side of Kenton's cheek.

Kenton continued the roll, watching the bit of carapace approach. *That had better be what I think it is…* he thought desperation.

The roll ended with Kenton on top. With a final shove of strength he slammed the Kershtian's shoulders down on the black speck.

The sand began to rise around them, three massive triangular claws bursting out of the sand. Kenton yelled, using his sand to blast himself into the air. The Kershtian held onto his clothing with

a desperate grip. The DelRak Naisha's claws continued to swing closed, rising below Kenton, spraying sand into the air. Kenton caught one look of surprise on the assassin's face before the claws snapped shut, crushing the Kershtian and catching the lip Kenton's robes as he spun free.

Kenton's robes tore as flipped backward in an arc, landing on the dune behind him. The DelRak attacked its meal, the Kershtian, still barely alive, screaming inside its grip. A second later, the screaming stopped. The DelRak shuddered suddenly, shaking violently, then it too stopped moving. Its three legs opened limply, a bloodied corpse slipping free. The sandling did not move again—it had been killed by the blood of its intended meal.

Kenton turned away from the mess, not daring to look at the mangled corpses behind him. Wearied, sickened, and horribly thirsty, he stumbled back toward Reegent's camp.

"How did he find you out here?" Eric asked.

Kenton shook his head, tying the saddle to his rezal. "I don't know," he confessed. "They must have someone watching the Diem. But, to track us across the *kerla*… Anyway, it looks like Ais was right about the timing—the assassin waited until twelfth hour passed, officially putting us into the next day, to attack me."

Eric nodded in agreement.

"How's your father?"

Eric shrugged. "He'll live, I guess."

"I mean, what does he think of you?" Kenton clarified.

Eric looked up, then shook his head. "Honestly, I don't know what I expected. He's still angry with me—he probably always will be. He still won't accept the idea that I'm not going to become Lord General after him. He even tried to give me a sword."

Kenton glanced down. He still hadn't asked his friend about the conspicuous absence at his side. Eric had never gone unarmed. Never.

If Eric noticed the look, he didn't acknowledge it. "We should go," he said, climbing into the saddle. "It's going to be a very long day."

Kenton nodded, climbing into his own saddle. He wanted to get some sleep first, but he could afford the wait. Time was very short—they would sleep when they got back to Kezare.

He strapped himself in and kicked the rezal into motion.

Kenton stumbled into the Diem, tired and sore from hours of riding. It was just past fifth hour—most of the Diem members would have awakened hours ago. Sure enough, he heard sounds coming from the courtyard.

"Ask yourselves, where is he now?" Kenton paused before entering the courtyard itself. It was Drile's voice.

"I'll tell you where he is," Drile continued. "He's out making plans for himself, plans to keep himself safe. We need to do the same. In a little over a week, the Diem will be no more. What will we do then? Where will we go? Who will protect us?"

Kenton sighed, leaning against the stone wall. Behind him Eric and Ais waited tiredly.

How many more battles will I have to fight today? Kenton thought with exhaustion.

"I've made plans for us already," Drile's voice continued. "I have promises, promises of wealth and protection."

Kenton took a deep breath, gathering what was left of his strength. *This has to stop,* he thought, shaking his head. *I don't have time to fight battles from within as well as without.*

There was a way. He had been avoiding it, but there was a way. A way to make Drile stop spreading chaos. Kenton stepped into the light.

"Drile! You are in violation of my express orders!" he said, putting more force behind his words than he thought he had left.

The former mastrell looked up with surprise. He had probably assumed that Kenton was going to stay away another day, since he hadn't returned the day before. However, the man's surprise was soon overwhelmed by contempt.

"Lord Mastrell," Drile said. "Welcome back."

"Enough, Drile," Kenton returned. "The Diem has suffered enough of your paranoia."

"Oh?" Drile asked innocently. "And, how does the Diem intend to stop it?"

"You and I obviously have a problem," Kenton informed, walking forward. The crowd parted for him.

"Obviously," Drile agreed.

"Then we need to settle it," Kenton said.

“I don’t see how.”

“There was a way, once,” Kenton said slowly, nodding toward the conference building standing in the center of the courtyard.

Drile’s face grew surprised and he turned, his eyes falling on the building.

“Many years ago, it had a different name,” Kenton informed quietly.

“The Pit,” Drile answered. The crowd of sand masters suddenly grew very tense. Drile turned back to regard Kenton. “You can’t be serious,” he returned.

“I’ve tried everything else,” Kenton said. “You leave me no choice.”

“I would cut you apart in a matter of seconds,” Drile returned with a smile.

“If you do, then I suppose I don’t deserve to be Lord Mastrell, do I?”

“Kenton, what are you doing?” a concerned voice asked a his side. Elorin stood at his side, the older man’s eyes concerned. Kenton ignored him.

“Drile of the Diem,” Kenton announced in a loud voice. “I challenge you to combat, one-on-one, in the Dueling Pit.”

Drile shook his head. “You are a fool.”

“What is your reply?” Kenton demanded.

“When do we do it?” Drile asked. “Now?”

“No,” Kenton replied. “I’m making the challenge—I pick the time.”

“When then?”

“Ten days,” Kenton said. “Right after the Council passes judgement on the Diem.”

Drile frowned. “Why wait?”

“Because, Drile,” Kenton informed. “I am going to save the Diem, no matter what you do to me. Today the Lord General offered his support, yesterday the Lord Artisan. In exchange for the chance to kill me, you will promise to stop spreading lies. You leave me to do my work, stop trying to turn the Diem against me. You won’t need to—if you kill me, then the Diem will be yours anyway. And it might still be a legal profession.”

Drile thought for a moment, then smiled, realizing what Kenton

was offering.

Yes, Kenton thought angrily, *I'll do the work, then you may kill me and take it. You will be Lord Mastrell.*

"I accept, Lord Mastrell," Drile said with a slight bow. "On one condition. We fight before the council makes its decision, not after."

Kenton frowned. "What is the difference?"

"That way, you'll never get instated as the real Lord Mastrell," Drile said with a vengeful smile. "You will be forgotten."

Kenton paused.

"That is the only way I'll agree to fight you," Drile announced.

"Fine," Kenton said.

"All right," Eric demanded, "what did you just do?"

"I challenged Drile to a duel," Kenton explained, flopping down into his chair. Dirin hurriedly brought him something to drink; there was a look of concern on the boy's face. Ais stood a short distance away, his face unreadable, as usual.

"I heard the challenge," Eric replied, sitting down. "What does it mean?"

"It means that Drile and Lord Kenton will fight to the death in the Pit," Elorin explained, standing beside the balcony, his aging eyes sad. "It is an old tradition, one almost forgotten. Sand masters haven't fought one another for centuries—the Pit has become a conference room for the mastrells. But once, long ago, even sand masters were more barbaric. Back then, the Pit was a place where they were allowed to kill one another."

Eric paused, accepting a cup of juice from Dirin. Ais continued to stand by the door, looking displeased about something.

"And," Eric asked hesitantly looking directly at Kenton, "can you defeat Drile?"

Kenton shook his head. "No. He will kill me."

"Great Sand Lord, man!" Eric snapped. "I'm supposed to be the insane one! What were you thinking?"

Kenton shook his head. "A Diem with Drile in charge is better than no Diem, Eric. Your father is right—the Diem keeps sand masters in check. If Drile were allowed to run off to the Rim Kingdoms, there is not telling the chaos he would cause. Someone had to stop him."

"By committing suicide?" Eric asked.

“Drile will make a horrible Lord Mastrell,” Kenton said, sipping his drink. “But others will follow. Maybe the work I can do in these next few days will last through Drile. If I change the Diem’s Charter so sand masters will have to earn their keep, not even Drile will be able to repeal it. Either way, it’s the only thing I could think of.”

Eric sat quietly for a few moments, leaving Kenton to his thoughts. Finally, he spoke. “Kenton, you are the most noble idiot I have ever known.”

Kenton smirked ruefully. “I’ve been selfish all my life, Eric. I always claimed I wanted to be a mastrell. Well, maybe it’s time I did something worthy of the title. Besides… who knows, maybe I’ll beat him.”

The disbelief must have sounded in his voice, because no one seemed encouraged by the remark.

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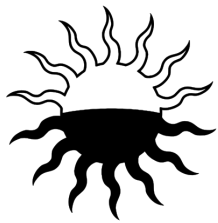

Well, maybe I can beat him, Kenton thought for the hundredth time. He still hadn't managed to convince himself. Still, he had to keep hoping. There had to be a way.

He stood on his balcony, thinking to himself as he watched the workers reinforcing Dirin's steps below. They toiled in the hot sun, lifting large stones into place at the base of the construction to stabilize it against the wind.

Kenton sighed. Unfortunately, it came down to one simple fact: Drile could control twenty-five ribbons of sand. Kenton had intentionally forced himself to stay awake for much of the day before, even though he had been tired, so that his sleep schedule wouldn't get out of sink with the rest of the Diem. During that time, he had read every book he could find on fighting another sand master. There weren't very many, but they all agreed on one thing. The sand master who could control the most ribbons had the definite, almost unbeatable, advantage.

"I'm ready, sir," Dirin's voice said from behind.

"All right," Kenton said, turning back into his rooms. "Let's try this."

The boy, standing on the other side of Kenton's rooms, raised his fist uncertainly, a look of concentration on his face. The sand clutched in his hand didn't flash to life, like Kenton's did. Instead, it

slowly began to glow, like old coals being stoked to build a new flame. A wavering ribbon lurched out of Dirin's fist, glowing sickly as it moved through the air toward Kenton.

"Good," Kenton approved. "Now hold it steady."

Dirin nodded, his face already showing signs of fatigue.

Kenton called his own sand to life. His glowing ribbon arced in the air for a moment, then snapped towards Dirin's. As soon as the tip of Kenton's ribbon touched Dirin's sand, Dirin's ribbon fell stale, dropping to the floor. Kenton's remained glowing.

"All right," Kenton said, pulling his sand back to let it hover in front of him. "Now, you try me."

Dirin reached down to pick up another handful of sand and called it to life. His ribbon didn't whip forward; instead it meandered. Eventually, it reached Kenton's ribbon and touched it on the side. Kenton's sand immediately fell stale.

"Now, directly on," Kenton said.

The two raised ribbons and sent them toward one another. They struck head on, and both fell stale.

"So the trick is to hit your opponent's ribbon from the side," Kenton mused. "Power doesn't matter. If you touch another sand master's ribbon with the tip your own, then you can make it fall stale."

Elorin, sitting in one of the plush chairs, nodded. "That is why the Diem has rules against touching another sand master's ribbons, Lord Mastrell. The tip of a ribbon contains the concentration of its energy; if it touches another ribbon, it interferes with that sand master's control."

"This is also why having more ribbons is such an advantage in combat," Kenton said with a sigh. "If you have enough ribbons to neutralize your opponents', you can deliver the killing blow."

"It appears so, My Lord," Elorin agreed.

"So, it's obvious what I have to do," Kenton said.

Dirin and Elorin looked at him with confusion.

"I just have to learn to master more ribbons."

"A task not easily accomplished, Lord Mastrell," Elorin said with a shake of his head. "Some might call it impossible."

"But it's not," Kenton said. "We know that because I've done it once already. The problem is, we don't know how I did it."

Kenton began to pace along the side of the room. “It doesn’t make any sense, Elorin,” he continued. “Why can I master three ribbons now. What did I do that changed my abilities?”

“I don’t know, My Lord,” Elorin confessed.

Kenton continued to pace, ignoring Dirin, who had pulled out a small rake and was evening the layer of sand on Kenton’s floor. *What did I do?* He hadn’t done anything. This one fact continued to bother him—as far as he knew, no sand master had ever gained more ribbons once he hit maturity. What was different about Kenton.

He continued to pace, his steps taking him from one side of the room, out onto the balcony, and back again. “What did I do…?” he mumbled. Then he stopped. His eyes fell once again on the workers, their muscles straining as the lifted the stones.

“I only did one thing, Elorin,” Kenton realized. “I overmastered.”

“What are you saying, Lord Mastrell?” Elorin said from behind.

Kenton smiled with excitement, turning back into the room. “What if overmastering could make a sand master stronger?”

“But it doesn’t, My Lord,” Elorin corrected. “Overmastery weakens a sand master, destroying his power and possibly killing him.”

“Who told you that?” Kenton asked.

“Why, the mastrells,” Elorin replied, frowning at the challenge.

“Exactly,” Kenton replied. “Elorin, what if it has all been a lie? Ever since my first day in the Diem I have been warned against overmastery. It was called evil, destructive, selfish—as acolents were we instilled with a powerful compulsion not to overmaster. But, what if it was all a lie?”

“A lie by whom?”

“The mastrells,” Kenton informed. “You know how they loved to hoard power. If there were a way to increase the number of ribbons a sand master control, I’d swear on the Sand Lord that the mastrells would keep it secret. Haven’t you ever wondered why powerful undermastrells can never control more than nine ribbons, yet even weak mastrells can control eighteen or twenty?”

“That is because they are mastrells,” Elorin explained. “Mastrells are special.”

“Special because they know how to increase their power,”

Kenton said with a nod. “Don’t you see, Elorin? It makes sense. The taboos against overmastery, they are all just to keep anyone else from discovering the secret! I’ve heard guards in the Tower explain to me that the only way to build large muscles is to exercise to the point that you’re sore, and when your strength returns you will be able to lift more next time. What if this is the same thing?”

On the other side of the room, Dirin was frowning.

“What, Dirin?” Kenton asked.

“I’m sorry, but… what about Elorin, sir?” Dirin asked. “He overmastered too.”

Kenton paused, looking down at the elderly sand master. “Elorin,” he asked, “how long has it been since you tried to master sand?”

“I haven’t tried since I burned myself out,” Elorin said uncomfortably.

“Would you try again?” Kenton requested.

Elorin sat for a moment, then he nodded slowly. Kenton could see the pain in his eyes as he picked up a handful of sand, feeling it between his fingers for a moment. Then, he stretched the hand forward and closed his eyes. Kenton waited with excitement.

Nothing happened.

“I’m sorry, My Lord,” Elorin said, shaking his head and dropping the sand. “But I can’t feel anything. The sand won’t do what I tell it.”

“Sands!” Kenton cursed, turning back to his pacing. “I thought I had something.”

“Sir?” Dirin asked.

“What?” Kenton asked absently.

“Sir, do you recognize this?”

Kenton looked over to where Dirin was standing. The boy was stooped over, pulling something from the sand on the floor. It was dark black, like a folded piece of paper. Kenton walked over, studying the paper with a critical eye. He didn’t recognize it.

He unfolded it as Dirin handed it to him. “It’s in Kershtian,” he sand with confusion.

“Can you read it?” Dirin asked.

“Yes,” Kenton said, “at least, most of it. ‘To the hunter,’” he translated. “‘the prey grows wearied of the chase. He will act soon.

Be warned.'"

"What on the sands are you people talking about?" Eric asked, pushing open the door.

"I wish I knew," Kenton said, lowering the piece of paper. "Did you sleep well?"

"I slept just fine, thank you, oh condemned one," Eric replied, walking over and taking the paper from Kenton's hands. He read it with a confused look on his face. "It's either the oddest death threat I've ever seen, or a secret recipe for Kershtian stew cleverly disguised as utter nonsense."

Kenton snorted, refolding the paper.

"Where did you find it?"

"Dirin found it," Kenton said, nodding toward the boy. "It was buried in the sand on my floor."

Eric nodded appreciatively. "Thanks, kid. It's always nice to start the day with a bit of insane babbling."

"You're in rare form this morning, Eric," Kenton noted, leaning back against the wall as Eric poured himself a drink.

Eric shrugged. "My best friend is determined to be a martyr, my father has gone from ignoring me to hating me, and I'm hungry. What isn't there to be pleasant about?"

"I'm not determined to be a martyr," Kenton corrected. "Trust me, I'm doing my best to find a way out of this. But, if that's what it comes down to, that is what I will need to do."

"That's the problem with the new you," Eric said, raising his cup at Kenton. "You're so concerned with what is expected of you that you've forgotten what it is that kept you going all those years. The thing that got you into the Diem in the first place."

Kenton smiled ruefully. "Eric, I can't be a rebel and an authority figure at the same time."

"Why not?" Eric asked.

"Because," Kenton said with exasperation. "The two are mutually exclusive. I've spent the last few days finally realizing how wrong I was all my life. All the fighting, all of the rebellion—I was wrong."

"If you were wrong," Eric said quietly, "then I should be Lord General. I refuse to accept that. You've realized what you did wrong, now you just have to realize what you did right. Somewhere

in the middle is who you really are. So, where are we going today?"

Kenton shook his head slightly, trying to make sense of Eric's words. *Who I really am? I don't have time for personal discovery right now, Eric. I've got a Profession to save.*

"Well," he said out loud, "there is only one Taisha left. I suppose we should at least try and visit him."

"Vey," Eric replied with a nod. "What about the Lord Mason?"

Kenton shrugged. "He hasn't appointed another emissary yet—in fact, the last one probably just got back to Nor'Tallon. We'll have to wait for the Lord Mason to appoint another representative before we can do anything."

Eric nodded. "To the Lord Merchant, then. I'm glad I didn't have anything for breakfast—Vey will probably make me sick to my stomach."

Ais poured over the documents, memorizing every detail, searching out every hidden clue, squeezing information from the stark words. He couldn't participate in the investigation—not while he was required to follow the Lord Mastrell—but he could still lead it. His men made careful records of what they observed and what their contacts told them. Every morning, before meeting the Unholy One, he looked over the previous day's findings.

Eventually, the random information formed into a pattern before him. "You will strike here," he declared.

Tain leaned in close. He was doing a fine job of being second, now that Jedan was dead. The tall man had a deceptively-simple face. Tain was much smarter than he appeared, even if his features—a large, flat nose and bushy, unkempt eyebrows—didn't give any hint to that fact. At least one thing was comforting—if Ais couldn't lead the band personally, at least his replacement was competent.

"The boat races, sir?" Tain asked with confusion.

Ais nodded slowly, shuffling a few papers out of the many stacks. "Look," he said, pointing to a set of figures. "The bookkeepers show a huge influx of money in private accounts over the last month." He pulled out a second sheet of paper from a completely different stack. "Now here, what do you see?"

Tain shrugged. "Winnings lists."

"See any patterns?"

Tain studied the paper for a moment. "No," he finally said. "It

looks completely random. The results are in line with the separate odds for the boats."

"No," Ais corrected. "Maybe in the individual cases, but not on a large scale."

Tain shook his head. "I can't see it, sir," he confessed.

"The outside lanes win more than the inside ones," Ais explained. "It doesn't matter which boats are in those lanes, they tend to beat the odds. Nilto's too smart to rig the races so that a single boat is favored—that's too obvious. But, if he can work it so that certain lanes win more than others, he can steadily make money. He just has to tell his people to bet on the outside. Eventually, over time, it will pay off."

Tain nodded slowly. "All right, sir. We'll set up observation."

"Good," Ais said, standing and straightening his uniform.

"Sir," Tain said, turning before he left, "your presence is missed."

"In nine days, Tain," Ais said formally, "this will all be over. Trust me—it will be worth the wait to get rid of the sand masters."

"Yes, sir," Tain said, saluting and leaving.

Ais left a few moments later—he didn't want to miss the Lord Mastrell. Somehow he knew that despite the man's overtures of friendship, Kenton would ditch Ais if possible. Ais walked down the hallway, his cloth-wrapped shoes falling quietly on the stone floor. There had been precious little time for his family lately—a problem, since Mellis was growing increasingly worried. Ais felt he was close to Nilto. Lokmlen had been convicted of murder a few days before, and in exchange for his life, the man had finally agreed to release a few names. None of them were Nilto, of course, but both were very important men in his organization. If Ais could cut off enough of Nilto's revenue, he would grow desperate. Desperate men made mistakes.

Unfortunately, Ais knew that desperate men were also capable of incredible cruelty—especially men like Nilto. Ais had ordered a pair of trackts to keep constant surveillance on Mellis, while silently cursing his inability to head the investigation. He understood the Lady Judge's need, but her timing couldn't have been worse.

All of the tension had put Ais on edge, and he was finding it more and more difficult to maintain control. On top of it all, he

hadn't been able to visit the *Ker'Reen* temple recently. His interaction with the Lord Mastrell had sullied him, and he would have to go purification rituals before he would be worthy to return to sacred ground. And so, Ais was left without either of the stabilizing forces in his life—he saw his wife sporadically, and he was unable to take part in *Ker'Reen* worship services.

Nine days and it will all be over, he reminded himself. *I am witnessing historic times. The end of the sand masters.*

He just hoped he would last that long.

One would probably presume to find the Lord Merchant's office somewhere in the marketplace. Such was not the case. Vey's business office was situated on the northern side of the island, far from the bustle and exchanges of the marketplace. It wasn't on the small *kelzi* island—Vey liked to keep his social life and his business dealings separate—but it might as well have been.

The office looked more like a mansion. The northern edge of Kezare was a rocky shelf, with a steep cliff bearing the brunt of the river current. Vey's office sat overlooking the cliff, holding arguably the most scenic point on the entire island. To one side lay the river and horizon, and in the other direction one could look down at the entire city.

"What makes you think he will even agree to see you, *Ry'Kensha*?" Ais asked. The trackt had met them outside the Diem just after Eric and Kenton had started on their way to visit the Lord Merchant.

"He has to," Kenton replied. "It's professional courtesy."

"From what I've heard," Eric mumbled, "the Lord Merchant is a little bit lacking in courtesy—professional or otherwise."

"He is a businessman," Kenton said firmly. "He'll negotiate, as long as I have something he wants."

"And that is?" Eric asked.

"I'm still trying to decide," Kenton admitted, walking up the steps to the building.

Four hired Tower guards stood at the doors to the office, and Kenton counted eight more as they made their way to the audience hall. Vey's waiting room was different than others. For one thing, it wasn't filled with common people, like the Lady Judge's or Lord Artisan's. Instead, the small chamber was packed with men in

wealthy robes. They would be seen according to whom was willing to pay the most for an audience. The room was cramped, but the wide doors at the back were open, allowing all to listen to Vey's current audience. The Lord Merchant liked people to be able to hear him speak.

Eric noted the four additional guards standing in this room. "Paranoid, isn't he?"

"Having a lot of money tends to make someone that way," Kenton whispered back. The Lord Merchant was, by definition, the richest man in Lossand. Unlike the Lord Mastrellship, which was elected, or even the Lord Generalship, which was inherited, the Lord Merchantship was given in a completely different way. Whomever held the most wealth was offered the title. Technically, if a man gained more riches than the current Lord Merchant, he could steal the Taisha. Of course, that was practically impossible—when a man was made Lord Merchant he inherited all of his predecessor's wealth, making it difficult indeed for anyone else to match him.

Kenton stepped up to the admissions attendant, a young man in flowery red robes. "I need to see the Lord Merchant," he informed.

The boy looked him over.

"I'm the Lord Mastrell," Kenton added, noting the uncertainty in the boy's eyes.

"Just a moment," the boy said, standing. "Please, take a seat."

Kenton regarded the benches with distaste. However, when he turned back around, the boy had already left. The boy returned a moment later an gestured toward the seats again.

"It will only be a few minutes," the boy assured.

Kenton sighed, walking over to one of the benches and taking a seat.

"Professional courtesy?" Eric grumbled, taking the seat next to Kenton. "You realize he probably intents to make us wait a few hours before seeing us."

Kenton nodded. "Probably," he agreed. "Though there is no use complaining about it."

"There isn't?" Eric asked. "I've always found it relaxing to complain."

"Personally, I've always found something else more effective."

Eric looked up with interest as Kenton reached toward one of his sand pouches. “You wouldn’t,” Eric said. It sounded almost like a challenge.

Kenton called the sand to life. Every other person in the room jumped visibly, several of them pulling back with pale faces. Slowly, Kenton ordered the sand out of his hand, forming a tiny ribbon barely a few grains wide. The ribbon rose toward the center of the room, wiggling slightly in the air, leaving a glowing trail behind it. Kenton leaned his head back, imagining a pattern in his mind.

The ribbon continued to move, wrapping around itself, moving like a needle and thread worked by an invisible hand. It twisted, looped, and curled, creating a complex pattern in the air. The result was an expanding, radiant mosaic. It contained no specific picture—it was more a transfixing matrix of shifting lines and colors. The more his sand wove, leaving its trail behind it, the more intricate the pattern became.

Kenton had begun creating similar patterns years ago, when he had realized that the Diem’s teachings could no longer help him—his control and precision had outstripped the abilities of his teachers, yet his ribbon-limitations had kept him from moving on to higher lessons. So, he had taught himself, finding ways to increase the delicacy of his touch.

The sand spun and wove. Kenton continued to add sand, depleting three of his four sand pouches in the process. Slowly, the room’s occupants lost some of their fear as they stared up at the shifting mass of sand, following its lines with their eyes. There was a look of awe in their eyes. Almost a look of reverence.

“What are you doing!” a shrill voice demanded.

Kenton looked over, not releasing his sand. Vey stood in the doorway. His diminutive form was angry as he stared at the sand. “How dare you practice your unholy art in my offices!”

“There is no Law against sand mastery, Lord Merchant,” Kenton said, letting the delicate pattern meld back into a glob of sand, which he let drop into a carapace bucket sitting beside the door.

“That will soon change, *Ry’Kensha*,” Vey spat.

“Are you going to see me now, Lord Merchant?” Kenton asked. “I suppose I could wait longer—of course, I would have to find

some way to entertain myself."

"No," Vey cursed. "Come in. The sooner we talk, the sooner I can get rid of you."

"That's very kind of you, Lord Merchant," Kenton said with a smile, leading the way into Vey's audience chamber.

Vey followed with a snort of disdain. There was a short hallway which turned to the right. At the end was a moderate sized room with a large dais at the front. The dais had a desk on it. Kenton suspected that both dais and desk were efforts on Vey's part to mask his diminutive height.

Vey took his seat with an angry stare. "All right, *Ry'Kensha*," Vey demanded. "What do you want?"

"Nothing but the graces of your Lordship's support," Kenton said.

Vey laughed. It was an annoying laugh—one full of both mirth and antagonism.

"My Lord," Kenton said seriously. "I believe I can offer you something worth your support. I am prepared to let you have sand masters to do with as you—"

"I already know of your deal with the Lord Artisan," Vey snapped. "The same cajoling won't work on me, *Ry'Kensha*. I can't make money off of your sand masters—it would be unethical."

"Ethics has never mattered to the Guild before," Kenton noted.

"It does when sand masters are involved," Vey informed. "Even if I were inclined to support you, do you know what my people would do to me if they heard I had voted for the Diem?"

"Surely it wouldn't be that bad," Kenton said. "After all, you always paid your tribute, didn't you?"

Vey paused for a brief moment. Then he snorted. "That is completely different—we were legally bound to do so. If I supported you willingly, I would be forever marked. Ask him." Vey nodded toward Ais, who stood quietly at the back of the room. "Tell me, trackt. Have you ever regretted your betrayal of your people?"

Ais didn't respond.

"Now you travel with a sand master," Vey continued. "As if your soul weren't already forfeit, you have to make absolutely certain to earn the Sand Lord's wrath."

Kenton shot a look back at Ais. Fortunately, the cool-mannered

trackt was acting with customary emotionlessness—Kenton blinked in surprise. No, Ais wasn't displaying customary control—his face was growing red, his eyes wide with anger. The rage Kenton saw rising in the normally cold-hearted trackt's eyes was a chilling sight. The Lord Merchant continued his baiting.

"You are disgrace," Vey spat. "Your soul will wander the sands, exiled from the Sand Lord. You are no better than they. In fact, you are worse. You are one of us, but a traitor."

"Kenton," Eric warned quietly. "I think you might want to do something. This could become very ugly very quickly."

Kenton stood indecisively for a moment. However, the rage—and shame—in Ais's face grew to be too much for him. He took a deep breath, and called his sand to life.

Kenton pointed sharply at Vey. The sand flew true, drilling through the Lord Merchant's table with a crack, shattering its wooden finish, and continuing on to pause just before the Kershtian's chest.

The Lord Merchant fell silent, a line of sand hovering just in front of his chest.

"That is enough, Vey," Kenton warned.

"You threaten me in my own chambers?" Vey asked angrily.

"You insult the man I bring as a guest?" Kenton returned. "An honored and widely-respected member of the Hall?"

"I hate you," Vey hissed.

"Good," Kenton informed. "You're true to your religion. Now, be true to your Profession. What will it cost me to buy your vote?"

"I would sell my very soul first," Vey informed, standing on his chair. "Get out!" His voice wavered uncertainly as he made the command.

Kenton released his sand, and Vey jumped as it dropped to the ground. "Come on," Kenton snapped, stalking from the building.

"Well, that went about as we had expected," Eric said lightly as they emerged into the sun.

"Unfortunately," Kenton said, shaking his head. "But, I had to be sure."

"I'll bet he's probably still shaking with fear," Eric said with a vengeful smile.

"You've grown evil since I last knew you, Eric," Kenton said

with a smirk.

Eric shrugged. “I doubt there is a Lossandin on dayside who wouldn’t find the concept of Vey quivering with fear an interesting prospect. Half of them probably owe him money.”

Suddenly, a hand fell on Kenton’s shoulder. He spun, only to find Ais standing behind him. The trackt’s face was dark.

“Never do that again,” Ais said in a soft, but harsh voice.

“Do what?” Kenton asked.

“Defend me,” Ais explained.

Kenton snorted. “If it’s any consolation, senior, you were only an excuse. I doubt that conversation could have ended any other way.”

“Regardless,” Ais said, raising an olive-skinned finger. “No matter what you think, no matter what it looks like, I don’t want your help. Do you understand, *Ry’Kensha*?”

Kenton just shook his head. “I can’t win with you, can I?”

“I thought that was obvious,” Ais said coldly.

“Well, what now?” Eric asked, ignoring the trackt. “That’s the last of the Taishin, unless you want to visit the Lord Farmer.”

Kenton reached up, rubbing his forehead. “No. He’ll vote with Vey, no matter what I say to him.”

“Back to the Diem, then?” Eric asked.

Kenton nodded. “For now. I have to think.”

They started back toward the docks, Kenton lost in thought. Seven Taisha, and only one firm commitment. It wasn’t going well. Of course, he hadn’t really expected it to. He spent the entire trip trying to decide what to do next. He obviously had to find a way to overcome the Diem’s financial situation—if he could pay the Lord Artisan, then he would probably earn both Rite’s vote and the Lady Judge’s. Those two, plus Delious, would give him four. Perhaps he could even get the Lord Mason’s representative—though, since each emissary was different, it was difficult to judge how they would vote.

Still, Vey was going to present the biggest problem. One Kenton had no idea how to overcome.

Back in the Diem, they found a messenger waiting to deliver a note to Kenton. The boy stood in the courtyard, waiting nervously. He proffered his message, then moved to dash away.

“Wait,” Kenton ordered, unfolding the paper with a frown. If the

letter turned out to be like the one Dirin had found, he wanted some way to track down who had written it.

The boy waited unhappily as Kenton read the note.

“Well?” Eric asked impatiently. “More babblings?”

“After a form,” Kenton said uncertainly. “It’s an invitation.”

“From whom?” Eric asked with interest.

“The Lord Admiral. He’s throwing a ball… one apparently in honor of me.”

“Delious?” Eric asked, perking up. “A party? I’d better be invited.”

“It doesn’t mention you,” Kenton said, continuing to read. “Though say I should bring my ‘darkside beauty.’ What kind of nonsense is that?”

Eric shrugged. “She is kind of pretty. You’re sure it doesn’t mention me?”

“Yes, she is pretty. But we’re not…” Kenton sighed. “Oh, sands.” He turned back to the messenger. “Boy, did you bring me another message earlier today?”

The messenger frowned. “No, sir.”

Kenton removed the message from one of his pouches. “Are you certain? You don’t recognize this?”

“No, sir,” the boy promised.

“Wait!” Ais said sharply. “Hand that to me.”

Kenton raised an eyebrow, but handed the letter to Ais. The trackt read it with intense eyes, then crumpled it in his fist.

“What is it?” Kenton asked.

“Nothing you need concern yourself with,” Ais replied.

“Nothing of my concern?” Kenton asked. “It was found on the floor of my room.”

“It is a message for me,” Ais said. “He must have known that it would get to me somehow.”

“He?” Kenton pressed. “Who?”

Ais didn’t reply. Finally, Kenton gave up, tipping the boy with a half-lak coin and sending him on his way.

“I can’t believe he didn’t invite me,” Eric said with a hurt tone. “Delious will probably have quite the buffet.”

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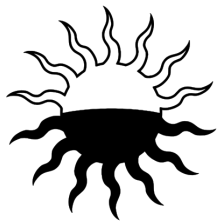

Khriss stubbornly ignored the knock at her door.

She lay curled in her bed, covers thrown over her, even though she didn't really need them in dayside's heat. Gevin's pistol lay on the bed-stand, its silver handle shining dully in the room's quiet light. The carving was exquisite—Khriss herself had given it to him on his sixteenth birthday. He had treasured it from that day forward, always wearing it at his side.

The knock came again. Khriss said nothing. She wasn't tired—she had slept for most of the day before, not even rising to eat. Still, she couldn't force herself out of bed. Instead, she sat playing with Gevin's signet ring. An etched ruby set in a large gold band. It was too large for any of her fingers but the thumb.

Whoever it was at the door—probably Cynder—must have given up, for the knocks ceased. At first they had tried to console her, encouraging her to eat. They had soon realized, however, that she didn't want to be comforted.

Oh, Gevin… What will I do now?

She could still get married, of course. She was young, and her title was prestigious. But, it would be a purely political marriage—there were only so many men in Elis that the sole heir to a Duchy could marry. Coraden, maybe. He was forty years old, but his wife had passed away some time ago. It would be a good union.

Of course, if she got married, she would have to leave her studies and spend most of her time fulfilling her duties as wife and duchess. Right now her father saw to the running of their land—he was an excellent manager, even if he wasn't legally capable of inheriting the family title. Khriss's ignoring of such matters was suffered because of her youth, and because of Gevin's influence with the court. However, if she did marry, then her husband would certainly expect her to be more compliant.

Or maybe she wouldn't get married. She could go back to her studies, continue the bookish life that had made her such an aberration in the court. It would be a scandal, of course. But, not a large one—no one expected much of her anyway. She might be able to get away with it, especially if she named one of her younger cousins as her ward and heir. She would be able to live her life as she wished. Of course, that would also mean living her life alone, without anyone to share her time…

Gevin, how dare you die! She thought bitterly. This was the exact decision she had tried to avoid by coming to look for him. Did she marry a man she didn't know, abandoning her love for learning? Or did she become an old maid, lonely but independent?

It would be difficult to find another man like Prince Gevalden. A man so courteous, so willing to give her freedom to do as she wished. He had always been so respectful of her, unlike that scoundrel Kenton. Gevin had been refined, Kenton was belligerent. Gevin had been funny, Kenton was downright merciless in his teasing. The sand master was probably the least-likable man she had ever met. That tussled brown hair, capricious smile, teasing eyes with an edge of solemness to them…

Why am I even thinking about him? Khriss thought angrily. *I'm mourning Gevin right now.*

She heard footsteps sounding from outside, and sighed. *Not again…*

This time, however, there was no knock. The door simply opened, and Baon strode into the room.

Khriss huffed indignantly. "Baon!" she snapped. "How dare you? What if I were…"

The rest of her objection was muffled as Baon selected a robe from he closet and tossed it at her, covering her head.

“Put it on,” Baon said. “You have guests.”

“Tell them I’m sick,” Khriss retorted, pulling the robe off her head.

“I’ll tell them you’re moping, if you like,” Baon said, pausing in the doorway.

“How dare…” she sputtered. “Baon, I just lost my betrothed husband! Don’t I deserve a period of mourning?”

“You lost your betrothed two years ago, duchess,” Baon returned. “Don’t tell me you weren’t expecting this. You’re mourning the failure of your expedition as much as you are Prince Gevalden’s death.”

“I…” Khriss said, trailing off. “Oh, Baon. What do we do now? Just slink back to darkside in failure?”

“That is one option,” Baon said with a nod. “But, duchess, let me give you one last lesson on leadership. This is your expedition, you determine its outcome. Failure and success—those are words for historians. Your job is to do the best you can with the resources allotted you. Some of the greatest military victories in history were achieved by men who started their campaigns with completely different goals in mind. Some of the greatest disasters in history were achieved by men who pursued their goals with such single-minded focus that they ignored other opportunities that came along. Flexibility is a leader’s most useful weapon.”

Khriss smiled slightly. Those who assumed Baon was a man of few words were wrong—one just had to get him on the right topics.

Baon took her smile as a sign of agreement, and left, pulling the door closed behind him. Briefly, a random, almost silly thought popped into her mind. What about Baon? Her mother had married a military man, and after his loyalty on this expedition, Baon would certainly be knighted—foreigner or not. The court would frown on the match, but such things were growing more and more frequent during recent years.

But, as soon as the thought occurred, Khriss discarded it. Their relationship just wasn’t like that. He was fond of her—she could sense that much—but it was a familiar fondness, not a romantic one. It was a feeling she returned. Baon was growing to be like the older brother she’d never had, always offering advice, guiding her with his experience and wisdom, doing things he shouldn’t even

consider—like walking into a lady's bedchamber without knocking.

With a sigh, she climbed out of bed and tried to do something with her tear-stained, puffy-eyed face. There was still a feeling of sadness in the back of her heart—regardless of what Baon claimed, Khriss really had been shocked by the news of Gevin's death. No matter how much she prepared herself, no matter how much she'd assumed she would never see him again, a piece of her had held onto hope. Now even that hope was gone, and it left a space in her soul.

But, she could function with the hole there. It was like the hole her mother had left when she died—Khriss doubted that either hole would ever get better. But, she could go on. She really didn't have much choice.

Eventually she managed to get enough makeup on her face, enough of the tangles out of her hair, and enough perfume on to make her less-horrifying. She put on the robe Baon had chosen—a blue one that was bright by dayside standards—along with a pair of her heeled darkside shoes.

Gathering herself as she prepared to open the door, Khriss assumed a duchessly posture and walked out into the hallway. Who would be visiting her? Loaten, maybe? Another darkside official who had heard of her loss? She arrived at the spiral staircase with a mind full of questions.

They evaporated as soon as she saw who was standing below, chatting with Baon.

"You!" she accused.

Kenton looked up with a smile. "Hello, Khrissalla. How have you been?" At his side stood the black-uniformed Kershtian she had seen a few days before, but the other man—Eric—wasn't there.

"I spent all that time getting ready, just to see you?" Khriss said, stalking down the staircase.

"Yes, and you certainly took your time," Kenton replied. "What is it about you darksider women? My mother would always spend hours getting ready in the morning."

Khriss ignored the gibe. "How did you find me?"

Kenton shrugged. "You've been maintaining a fairly high profile here in Lonzare. The people down here were so amazed to find a mastrell walking amongst them that they answered my questions

without even thinking."

Khriss reached the bottom of the stairs and marched over to him. Kenton frowned as she arrived, looking her over with a confused eye.

"You seem… taller," he mumbled, bending down to look at her feet.

Khriss hopped back with a blush. "What do you think you are—"

"What odd shoes," Kenton said, standing back up.

"They're called heels," Khriss said, continuing to blush. "Most women wear them on darkside."

"Why?" Kenton asked.

"I don't know," Khriss said. "To look taller. Why does it matter anyway? Did you ask the Lord General about Gevin for me?"

Now it was Kenton's turn to blush. "Um, sorry…" he mumbled.

"Never mind," Khriss returned. *Doesn't matter now anyway.* "Why are you here?"

"I have to have a reason to come visit my savior? I'm eternally indebted to you for saving my life, remember?"

Khriss shot him a withering look.

"All right," Kenton said with a chuckle, pulling out a sheet of paper. "The Lord Admiral is throwing a ball. He asked me to attend, and requested I bring you."

"Kenton, are you asking me to a dance?" Khriss accused. "I'm an engaged woman!"

Kenton blushed even further. "I know," he defended. "It wasn't my idea—apparently your little performance at the Lord Artisan's has started a few rumors."

"So it's my fault now?"

"Isn't everything?" Kenton shot back.

"One of these days you will learn some manners."

"I thought you wanted to meet the Taishin. Forgive me for trying to do you a favor."

"You could do me a favor by getting your arrogant face out of my house," Khriss retorted.

"So are you coming or not?"

"Of course I am. When is it?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Khriss said indignantly. "What kind of

forewarning is that?”

“Well, I only got the invitation yesterday, and since you neglected to leave me your address, I had to spend most of today trying to find you. I guess you’ll only have twelve hours to paint your face, rather than the usual twenty-four.”

Khriss snorted. “Well, you’re here. I might as well feed you. Are you hungry?”

Kenton shrugged. “I could eat.”

“What about him,” Khriss said, nodding toward the Kershtian.

Kenton turned. “Ais? I’m not even sure if he eats. Perhaps if you have a few roasted sand masters, he’d be willing to try them.”

Khriss frowned.

“He’s Kershtian,” Kenton explained. “He thinks sand mastery is blasphemy against his God.”

“So why…?”

“He’s a spy from the Lady Judge,” Kenton said amiably.

“Spy?” Khriss asked.

“In essence.”

Khriss shrugged. “Baon, what time is it?”

“Two o’clock, darkside time,” he said, checking the pocketwatch.

“Is lunch prepared?”

“It has been for some time,” the warrior informed. “I believe Idan tried to inform you of that fact a little while ago.”

Khriss blushed. “Of course. Where are Acron and Cynder?”

“Out looking for information, I believe,” Baon explained.

“Still?” Khriss asked with a frown.

“Cynder claims he doesn’t trust the words of the beggar,” Baon explained. “He wanted more proof.”

Khriss smiled, her mood lightened by their loyalty. It was hopeless—the gun and ring proved that, for neither were items Gevin would ever have let out of his possession. But, the professors’ determination was sweet.

“Idan,” Khriss called to the butler, who stood a short unobtrusively a short distance away, “tell the cook we’ll have lunch now.”

“Yes, My Lady,” he said with a bow, turning toward the kitchen.

“Come on,” Khriss said, leading Kenton away from the doors and

down the short steps toward the sitting room. They would have to wait a few moments while the cook set the table.

Kenton followed, frowning when he saw the fireplace. “What is that for?”

“Atmosphere,” Khriss said, nodding for him to take a seat. “On darkside most rooms have a fireplace or a stove—we need the warmth.”

“Warmth?” Kenton said with a frown. “Why would you want that?”

Khriss opened her mouth to give a retort to the obviously sarcastic comment, then paused. Kenton’s face was completely honest.

“You’ve never been cold before, have you?” she asked with wonder.

“Well, darksider town is a little bit cold,” Kenton mused. “I guess I can see why you’d want a fire down here.”

Khriss laughed quietly. “Darksider town is about as cold as a room with four blazing fireplaces back in Elis,” she said.

Kenton shrugged. “Then I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Well, I suppose it makes sense,” Khriss mumbled to herself. “If it’s never cold here, and it never rains… but, surely you use fire in cooking?”

Kenton frowned, shaking his head. “The sun cooks our food. Why would you use fire? That would burn the food.”

“Oh, my,” Khriss mumbled, finally understanding how fundamentally different their societies were. She had seen the outward signs—the cultural differences, such as the role of women or the materials used in construction—but she hadn’t grasped how deep the contrast went. Fire was such a basic building-block of society.

Kenton was admiring the room—he seemed especially interested in the grundlefish in their globes on the wall. “This is quite the place,” he noted, shifting in his chair. “Even mastrells don’t live so well.”

“Thank you,” Khriss said with a nod. “Is there something wrong with your chair?”

“It’s just so…”

“Soft?” Khriss asked with a smile. Maybe now he’d understand why she found dayside’s sand-stuffed chairs so inferior.

“Uncomfortable,” Kenton corrected. “It doesn’t bear my weight—I feel like I’m going to sink all the way down to the floor.”

Khriss snorted. “That feeling is called comfort, daysider,” she informed.

“If this is the darkside version of comfort, no wonder you people are always grumpy.”

“I’m not grumpy!” Khriss snapped.

Kenton smiled, then nodded toward the door. Idan stood waiting to catch her attention.

“Lunch is prepared, My Lady,” he informed.

“Good,” Khriss said, rising. Kenton followed, trailed, as always, by his Kershtian shadow. Khriss tried to smile at the strange policeman, an apology for speaking the entire conversation in Dynastic. The man’s face remained emotionless and cold, however, and his eyes regard Khriss with a piercing gaze. Khriss turned uncomfortably, feeling a sudden shiver strike her body.

The meal was a simple one—bread with a dipping sauce and some steamed vegetables. However, Khriss enjoyed every minute of it. For once Kenton was the one uncertain what to do, trying to mimic her motions as he ate. He held the utensils uncomfortably, ate the vegetables with a strange look on his face, and seemed fascinated by the bread.

“Well?” Khriss asked, about half-way through her meal.

“It’s… different,” Kenton confessed. “My mother fixed darkside food for me a couple of times for me, but I had forgotten how odd it was. The vegetables—what are they?”

Khriss shrugged. “Potatoes, a few carrots, some leeks.”

“These are potatoes?” Kenton asked with amazement, poking at a chunk.

Khriss nodded.

“But they’re so… mushy.”

“Well, yes,” Khriss agreed. “That’s what potatoes are like. You don’t mean to tell me you eat them raw?”

“We slice them and dry them in the sun,” Kenton explained.

“Do you dry everything in the sun?” Khriss asked with a frown.

“Pretty much,” Kenton admitted. “This bread… why is it so

fluffy?”

“Yeast,” Khriss explained.

“Who?”

Khriss shook her head. “Never mind. What about the flavor?”

Kenton shrugged. “It’s a bit bland,” he confessed.

“Bland?” Khriss asked incredulously.

“I’m afraid so. If only you had some—Oh, wait! Why didn’t I see that before?”

He raised his hand and there was a sudden flash. Khriss jumped in surprise as a line of glowing sand shot through the air in front of her.

That is definitely going to take some getting used to, she thought.

Kenton used the sand to pluck a small container off the serving table—Khriss had always thought it ornamental. However, as Kenton whipped the container back into his hand and popped of the top, Khriss realized what it must be.

The pungent scent of Kershtian *ashawen* spice floated through the room as Kenton dumped the black powder all over his plate. He took a bite.

“Ah,” he said with a nod. “Much better. Even if it is a bit soggy.”

Khriss watched with a gaping mouth. Once he was finished with the sand, Kenton gathered it in his hand and it stopped shining.

It turned black, Khriss thought with confusion. *Why did that happen?*

Kenton absently tucked the handful of sand in his belt as he continued to eat, apparently enjoying the meal much more now.

Khriss sighed, turning back to her own meal, frustrated. *How did he manage to put me on the defensive?* She though angrily. *He’s the one who’s supposed to be uncomfortable! Well, let’s see what he thinks of authentic Elisian wine.*

However, before she could make the order, a commotion came from the direction of the front door. A few moments later Cynder entered the room, bowing before Khriss.

“My Lady,” he said. “I am happy to see you mobile again.”

Acron entered right behind the linguist, towing a darkside man with skin light enough that he could have been Elisian.

“Who is that?” Khriss asked.

“A witness, My Lady,” Cynder informed. “The Divine themselves must have been watching over us, for we finally accomplished our task. This is Dorvorden, one of the guards assigned to the Prince’s expedition.”

“Well done, Cynder,” Khriss approved.

“Actually, My Lady,” Cynder said somewhat sheepishly. “Acron was the one who found him.”

“Acron?” Khriss asked with amazement.

The overweight man nodded eagerly.

“I had almost given up,” Cynder continued. “But then I walked buy a pub and saw Acron sitting and chatting with this fellow.”

“That is nothing short of amazing,” Khriss mumbled to herself.

“My lady?” Cynder asked.

“Never mind. Kenton, if you would excuse us?”

“Oh, go right ahead,” Kenton said with a smile, following Khriss as she rose and walked toward the sitting room. He obviously intended to listen in on the conversation.

Shella! Khriss thought with exasperation. *He has no concept of tact, does he?*

However, she didn’t want to bother with Kenton for the moment, so she ignored him, focusing on Acron’s ‘find.’ Dorvorden was dressed in an odd combination of dayside and darkside dress. He had a man’s open-fronted dayside robe, but underneath he wore the pants from a darkside soldier’s uniform and a dayside shirt.

Dorvorden was a quiet-looking man with straight hair, a thin body, and a slight nervous twitch. As Acron led Dorvorden into the room, Baon reached a quick, almost unnoticeable hand toward the man’s belt, pulling free a standard-issue solder’s pistol.

He tapped the weapon for a moment, eyeing its mechanisms, then snorted, handing it back to its owner.

“No charge,” Baon explained. “It couldn’t fire anyway—the hammer’s bent and the frizzen is completely missing.”

Dorvorden regarded his weapon sheepishly.

“Please sit down,” Khriss said, gesturing toward one of the seats.

The man complied, looking around him very uncomfortably. From the nervous glint in his eyes, she was surprised Acron had managed to convince him to come along at all.

“I warn you, My Lady,” Cynder whispered in her ear as she

moved to seat herself. “His information isn’t… encouraging.”

“I’m all right, Cynder,” she assured.

Kenton walked into the room and took a seat without being offered one; his presence didn’t help Dorvorden’s mood. The man regarded Kenton with a look not unlike the one a rabbit would give a wolf.

Khriss seated herself lightly. “Idan, bring this man some tea,” she requested.

The butler bowed, moving to obey.

“Now, Dorvorden, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, My Lady,” the man said in a nervous voice. He spoke with a distinctly Elisian accent.

“You were one of Prince Gevalden’s guards?”

“Yes, My Lady. Dorvorden, fourth son of Earl Teadonin. I was a lieutenant in the Elisian guard.”

Khriss nodded. The Elisian army was very small, mostly ornamental. All natives who served in it were made officers—only mercenaries weren’t given ranks.

“Tell me exactly what happened once you left Elis, Dorvorden.”

The man looked around the room uncomfortably.

“Don’t worry about the repercussions, Dorvorden,” Khriss promised. “Tell me the truth, and you will be released. I promise. We’re only here for information, not to punish anyone.”

“Um, yes, My Lady,” shooting looks at Baon, Kenton, and Acron. “We left Elis and met our boat without trouble. It was a harrowing ride—we thought we would die, passing through the Border Ocean. We lost one man overboard in the storms, but the Prince ordered the sailors to keep going. Eventually we made it to dayside, and everyone’s mood lightened.

“Well, after that the Prince spent a few days in town making arrangements. He wasn’t happy to find out how far away Lossand was, and so he hired a boat to take us along to coast until we got closer. We stopped at one of the Rim Kingdoms—of course, I didn’t know it was a Rim Kingdom then, My Lady. The Prince hired packmen and guides, and we traveled west, passing into Lossand the next day. After that we continued south until we met up with the Nor’Tallon river. We followed that to Kezare.”

“And the Prince reached Kezare safely?” Khriss asked with

surprise.

"Um, no, My Lady," Dorvorden admitted, looking down at the floor. He ignored the cup Idan brought him. "You… you won't tell my family how we failed, will you My Lady? I'd rather they think me dead than know I failed to protect his Highness."

"I understand, Dorvorden," Khriss promised. "I will make no mention of your name when I return to darkside."

"Thank you, My Lady," Dorvorden said with a nod. "It happened just outside of town. I… I don't know why they waited so long. Maybe they wanted to see if they could subvert more of us, I don't know. Anyway, Lord Trevor was the one behind the betrayal."

"Lord Trevor?" Khriss asked with surprise. "You mean Baron Trevor?"

Dorvorden nodded sickly.

Shella! Khriss thought. *No wonder he wants me to keep his name quiet. Accusing such a high-ranking nobleman of being a traitor with no evidence…*

"I promise you, My Lady," Dorvorden continued. "It was the Baron. I know it sounds ridiculous, but it was him."

"I believe you," Khriss said reassuringly. In her mind, however, she questioned. Trevor had been one of Elis's preeminent generals, not to mention one of Gevin's trusted friends. He had been the only other nobleman of any rank on the expedition.

"Anyway, they attacked us when we were sleeping," Dorvorden explained. "Trevor had about a third of the guards on his side—I don't know how he convinced them. No one ever approached me. Maybe they knew I wouldn't be turned. Anyway, I think they intended to kill us in our sleep. But, one of them must have made a mistake, because I was awakened by a call to arms."

Dorvorden shuddered slightly, finally reaching for the tea, gulping it down in one drink. He coughed quietly for a moment, before continuing in a rough voice. "It was horrible, My Lady," he whispered. "I didn't know who to fight and who not to. Men were shooting randomly, attacking anyone who got too near. It was chaos. The scholars were cut down quickly—they were just in the wrong place, and got caught in the gunfire. The prince was yelling for us to get up, to fire at the men surrounding Baron Trevor… and then…"

Dorvorden sighed. “The bullet took the prince square in the head, my lady. He dropped immediately. Trevor yelled in triumph and, well…”

“You’re the one who killed the baron,” Khriss guessed.

Dorvorden nodded, his face pale. Killing a nobleman of such high rank, even in self defense, was a taboo on darkside.

“In the end,” the man continued, “only four of us survived. All loyal to the prince, I think. Anyway, with Trevor dead, I don’t think it mattered. Four men, out of almost fifty.”

“The Prince,” Khriss prodded. “What did you do with his body?”

“By the Divine,” Dorvorden whispered. “When we found him, he wasn’t dead yet. A bullet in the head, and still alive. It was sickening—his head was a mess. We didn’t know what else to do but carry him to Kezare—we were only a few hours away. He moaned the entire way, but his jaw was shattered, so he couldn’t speak. Somehow, we found our way to darksider town—we’d heard about it ahead of time, you see. We thought that if there were skilled physicians, they would be with the darksiders.

“But, well, we were too late. The prince fell unconscious before we even got to darksider town. Loaten—you’ve met him, My Lady?”

“Yes,” Khriss said quietly.

“Loaten took the prince in and sent for the best physicians, but they couldn’t do anything. The Prince wasted away in a coma, dying slowly. Loaten said that the prince woke up one time just before he died. Then, well, he passed on. In all, I suppose it took him four days to die. After that, we had a quiet funeral for him.

“Loaten told us we had to keep everything quiet—he said they found orders from Scythe himself on Trevor’s body. If the Dynasty knew there were witnesses to the killings, then they would come to find us. So, we didn’t tell anyone who we were or why we were here. We couldn’t go back to darkside, because then the Dynasty would know what had happened. Loaten said it had to be left a mystery, otherwise Scythe would hunt us down. I swear, My Lady, if he hadn’t been so commanding, I would have gone back. But I was so confused…”

“It’s all right,” Khriss said reassuringly. Strangely, the news brought no further grief to her heart. She already knew the prince was dead—news of exactly how it happened only served to quiet

her questions.

"Thank you, Dorvorden," she said.

The man nodded, rising and giving Khriss a formal bow. "I'm just glad someone finally knows," he explained. "One of the other boys, he died of a disease last year, and old Vent went south—I don't know what happened to him. The last boy, well, he wasn't right in the head after the attack, if you know what I mean."

Khriss nodded. "I'll tell your parents you died bravely, Dorvorden," she promised.

The man nodded, following Idan as the butler led him from the room.

"Cynder," she said, "please have Idan give that man something to keep him going for the next few months. A couple hundred lak should do it."

"Of course, My Lady," Cynder said.

Khriss sighed, leaning back in her chair. When she opened her eyes, Kenton was regarding her with a somber expression.

"I'm sorry, Khrissalla," he said sincerely.

She shook her head. "It's all right," she mumbled. "Nilto prepared me for this a few days ago—I already knew Gevalden was dead."

Kenton smiled slightly. "And you still got mad at me for asking a 'betrothed woman' to a ball?"

"You didn't know he was dead," Khriss said, mimicking his half-smile. "Besides, I couldn't let you get away with waking me up for no reason."

Kenton wasn't certain how to take the comment. She smiled, and her words were jovial, but he could see the grief in her eyes. She sat in the odd plush chair, sinking into its depths as if some massive weight were pushing her down.

Should I try to comfort her? He wondered. For some reason he wanted to do so—to reach out and take her in his arms, let her cry as she obviously needed to.

You fool, what are you thinking? She finds out that her betrothed is dead, and your first reaction is to try and edge your way in? Besides, she hates you, remember?

"Will you be… all right?" he asked instead.

Khriss shrugged. "I suppose," she said. "I knew this would be the

result. I don't know why I bothered to hope. I probably shouldn't have even come."

"Don't say that," Kenton whispered. "Don't call hope useless. For eight years I tried to become a mastrell. The rest of the sand masters called me a fool for even trying. But, for eight years I hoped. And, well, you can see the result. I have the golden sash, though I might not keep it for long…"

"How is that going, by the way?" Khriss asked. It was an obvious attempt to turn the conversation away from the pain of her loss.

Kenton shrugged. "Not that well, honestly. I only have eight days left, and only one of the Taisha has promised to vote for me. The rest range from undecided to outright hostile. If only there were a way…"

Kenton trailed off. He had spent the better part of the day before looking for *kelzi* willing to back the Diem with a lone in exchange for a percentage of the profits the sand masters would earn working for the separate Professions. Most of the wealthy, however, were too afraid to even see him. Perhaps when they heard that Reegent was going to vote for him they would change their minds, but Kenton doubted it. The *kelzi* respected Reegent, but most of them were also professed *Ker'reen* believers—the Kershtian religion was fashionable right now. Besides, even those who weren't *Ker'reen* hated sand masters. The mastrells had ignored their privileged society for decades, holding themselves as too important to deal even with the *kelzi.* The rich did not like being told they were insignificant.

"If only there were a way to do what?" Khriss asked.

Kenton looked up from his contemplations. "Nothing," he mumbled.

"No, what is it?" Khriss pressed.

Kenton sighed. "You heard the Lord Artisan, Khriss, you were there. Your compromise will be meaningless unless I can find a way to pay him what the Diem owes."

"Well, don't the sand masters have any money?"

"No," Kenton said with a shake of his head. "That's the problem."

"No cash at all?" Khriss pressed.

"No…" Kenton trailed off. There was the tribute—Heelis had

told him that for some reason the Guild still offered the quarterly gift to the Diem. But, the mastrells could demand any good or service free of payment. The tribute only amounted to a couple hundred lak a month—so negligible that Kenton hadn't even thought of it before. But, if the sand masters never needed to pay for anything, where had the money gone? It was probably just sitting around somewhere, perhaps distributed amongst the mastrells. Just sitting, piling up, growing over time…

"Sands!" Kenton said leaping to his feet.

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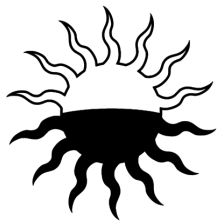

Khriss rose, following Kenton out of the room.

"What are you doing?" he asked, pulling open the front door.

"Following you," she informed.

"Don't you have anything better to do?" he complained, stepping out onto the darkened street, followed by the trackt, Ais.

"No, actually," Khriss realized, following them down the steps. "Whatever you just realized, *I'm* the one who helped you think of it. I deserve to go with you."

He rolled his eyes at the word 'deserve,' but he waved for her to join him. Baon appeared at the doorway, cursing slightly to himself as he threw on his open-fronted dayside robe to obscure his weapons. He rushed down to join them.

"Well?" Khriss said, walking beside Kenton as he walked toward the darksider town marketplace.

"Well what?" Kenton said, lost in thought.

"Well, what did I say that made you go rushing from my house, your lunch unfinished? That's quite an insult, if you didn't know."

Kenton smiled. "Sand masters don't get paid, per say. However, the other seven Professions have historically given us tributes—gifts, if you will, in exchange for our protection. The thing is, sand masters don't need money."

Khriss frowned, thinking back to the conversation between

Kenton and the Lord Artisan a few days before. “Because you can take whatever you want anyway.”

“Well, with some limitations,” Kenton explained. “We can’t just take from anyone—we’re only open to goods or services offered by a merchant, and the mastrells are the only ones who can actually do the taking. They’re the highest rank of sand masters. So, the question is, if the mastrells can take whatever they want, what did they do with all the tribute money?”

“I don’t know,” Khriss said with a shrug.

“I don’t either,” Kenton said. “But there is someone who will know.”

“Who?” Khriss asked.

Kenton shook his head as they entered the marketplace of darksider town. “His name is Elorin. You won’t know him.”

“Wait a moment,” Khriss said thoughtfully. “If the sand masters are allowed to take whatever they want, then how can the be in debt? Their thefts are technically legal, aren’t they?”

“I there’s a clause in the Law that says the mastrells are supposed to eventually pay for what they take,” Kenton explained, weaving through the jumble of shops and sales-tables. Darksider town’s market wasn’t as busy as the outside, but it still had a fair number of patrons. “The Law just doesn’t specify a time frame for the payment, so the mastrells ignored it.”

Khriss frowned. “So, exactly how long has this debt been accruing?”

“Longer than I’d like to admit,” Kenton said with a sigh.

They continued through the market, Khriss struggling to keep up in her heels. She didn’t know what she would do when they left darksider town and she had to walk on Kezare’s uncobbled streets. Perhaps the heels hadn’t been such a good idea. Kenton didn’t show any signs of slowing down, however, so she did her best. About half-way through the darksider marketplace she almost fell down, and stumbled into a crowd of surprised shoppers. The men regarded her with angry olive-skinned faces as she righted herself and hurried after Kenton.

“Funny,” she mumbled as she caught up. “I’ve never seen Kershtians down here before.”

Kenton froze. “What?” he asked sharply.

A moment later the arrows began to fly.

Kenton cursed, throwing himself toward a nearby stall. *This is getting old very quickly,* he thought angrily, pulling out two handfuls of sand.

To the side he saw Baon pulling Khriss to safety, while Ais stood squarely in the middle of the street, lowering his own weapon to fire, completely ignoring the danger to himself.

There is something seriously wrong with that man, Kenton concluded, calling his sand to life. A second later he jumped.

Kenton spun in the air above the marketplace, rising dangerously close to its low ceiling. He counted quickly—four *zinkall* archers in the front, three more approaching from behind. Frightened darksiders ran in every direction, most of them screaming loudly. Where was the eighth assassin?

Kenton fell as the archers began to fire at him. He propelled himself down with his sand, dodging the shots. As he landed he saw a nondescript Lossandin man pointing his arm at Baon. *Lossandin?*

"Baon, behind you!" Kenton yelled.

The darkside warrior spun, pulling out his pistols. However, instead of firing his *zinkall*, the Lossandin man decided to tackle Baon, throwing him against the side of a carapace shop.

Baon grunted, his pistols dropping to the ground as the wind was knocked out of his lungs. Unfortunately, Kenton had no time to help him. The three warriors behind were almost on them.

Kenton gathered his sand into a roughly man-shaped form and ordered it out into the street. Three *zinkall* arrows smashed into the decoy, making little patches of sand fall dead. Immediately, Kenton ducked out into the street, sending his sand forward. The three Kershtians had taken cover beside shops, and they took aim at Kenton as soon as they saw him. They waited just a second to fire, however, the decoy still fresh in their minds.

Kenton picked up a pot from a nearby shop, and as the men fired, he swing the pot at their arrows, knocking them out of the air. At the same time, he commanded his second ribbon to grab a similar weapon, and then swung it at a Kershtian's head.

The man dodged backward, swiping his hand at the stream of sand above him. The sand fell dead, the pot dropped to the ground.

Kenton cursed. They were getting smarter—someone must have

watched his first fight, noticing how he used random objects as weapons.

He backed up, falling in beside Ais, who had finally taken cover beside a shop. Baon was still struggling with his combatant—who, now that his robes had fallen away, reveled himself to be the largest, most muscular Lossandin man Kenton had ever seen. Khriss had dropped to the ground in confusion, but was now reaching for one of Baon's fallen pistols.

The pistols! Kenton thought. Just before Khriss's hand found the weapon, Kenton's sand snatched it and its companion off the ground. Kenton jumped back into the street, surprising the four Kershtians in front, who had been approaching carefully.

They looked up as Kenton raised his arms toward them, a ribbon of sand extending from each hand. Each ribbon gripped one of Baon's pistols.

The Kershtians ducked backward, expecting him to swing the pistols at their heads. Instead, Kenton positioned them directly in front of his enemies and used his sand to pull the triggers.

Twin explosions, amplified by the enclosed marketplace, rang through the market. People dropped, screaming and holding their ears. Kenton didn't follow—he turned the weapons toward the two remaining Kershtians and fired again.

After four shots, he was pretty much certain he was deaf. His ears rang as he dropped the pistols, jumping back toward cover to avoid shots from behind. Fortunately, Ais had been watching the other three, and he dropped a man with an arrow in the arm as they tried to fire at Kenton.

Kenton hit the ground, half expecting to have an arrow somewhere in his body. However, he appeared unharmed. He looked over to Baon, who was still grappling with his opponent. Khriss was repeatedly pounding the Lossandin assassin with a length of carapace as the two men rolled on the ground. None of the blows seemed to be doing any good, except maybe to distract the man.

Suddenly, Baon moved, pushing his opponent off him with a surge of strength. Baon reached down toward his leg with a free hand, ignoring Khriss as the girl accidentally smashed him on the head with her board. As the Lossandin assassin fell back down

toward Baon, the darkside warrior whipped a very wicked knife out of a sheath at his calf. A second later, his opponent, off balanced by the push, fell back on top of him—landing directly on the knife.

Baon rammed the knife up toward the man's heart, then he ripped the weapon free, jumping up into a defensive crouch and shooting Kenton a look.

Ais said something Kenton couldn't make out with his ringing ears, lowering his *zinkall*.

Kenton peeked out. The remaining Kershtians had taken their wounded comrade and were running off.

Kenton rubbed his ears. Some of the ringing had stopped, but his hearing hadn't completely returned, though Baon assured him it would.

Trackts swarmed over the darkside marketplace—only Ais's presence had saved Kenton from answering a lengthy list of questions. Instead, he had time to kneel next to the man Baon had killed.

"Lossandin," Kenton confirmed, checking the skin.

"What does it mean?" Baon asked.

"I don't know," Kenton confessed. "The Kershtian high priest has a contract on my life, but this is the first Lossandin who has tried to kill me." Kenton rubbed at the man's forehead. He wore scars like the others, but his were fresh.

"I had heard news of this," a voice said in Lossandin beside him.

Kenton looked up as Ais studied the body.

"The A'Kar has said he would let Lossandins join Kershtian families if they were willing to dedicate themselves only to him," the trackt explained. "I'd assumed the rumors were false."

Kenton shook his head ruefully. "So, I'm not only being hunted by the most avid A'Kar in recent history, but also the most open-minded one?"

"This new A'Kar is different," Ais explained. "He has strange ideas, and he's determined to win the Choosing. If he lets Lossandins join, then his *DaiKeen* will grow faster than any of the others, giving him more power. Of course, right now there's only one thing keeping him from winning the Choosing."

"What?" Kenton asked.

"You," Ais said, standing. "He told the Kershtian people he had

destroyed the mastrells. That was before you came back. Now he looks like a liar and a fool."

No wonder he's eager to have me dead, Kenton thought.

"How come every time I go somewhere with you, I almost get killed?" a new voice demanded, and Kenton had to switch his thinking back to Dynastic.

"Trust me, Khrissalla," he said. "I would avoid this if I could."

Khriss stood with her arms folded, staring him down with a distrustful eye. "All right," she said. "I want the story. The entire story. No more dodging—who are you, what is going on, and why does everyone want you dead?"

Kenton sighed. *She does deserve it,* he reminded himself. "All right. Let's go back to the Diem first."

And so, he told her. Khriss listened to fascination as Kenton related his life story. He spoke of his darksider mother and mastrell father, his desire to join the Diem, his childhood filled with pain. He told her how he got into the Diem on a technicality, how he struggled to do what other sand masters found easy. He talked about all the hours he spent practicing, honing his skill, until he could do things no other sand master could.

Then he spoke of his frustrations. He explained his desire to impress his father—a desire that twisted until it became a compulsion to spite the man at every possible occasion. Kenton spoke of his frustrations with his fellow sand masters, who respected him on one hand but mocked him at the same time. He told her of his refusal to accept ranks in the Diem until his father recognized the accomplishments he had made.

He told her much more than she had expected him to. Kenton released the story like a massive sigh, expelling his inner feelings, talking to her like an old friend despite the horrible way she had treated him.

And horrible it had been. She began to feel guilty as he told her the story of his father's death and the slaughter of the sand masters. She remembered how suspicious of him she had been during their travel back, how demanding she had been of his time when all he wanted to do was get back and find out which of his friends had lived.

She vaguely remembered the look in his eye after the Kershtians

had tried to kill them—the despair. She finally understood why he had acted the way he did. He had assumed his powers were gone forever. Kenton continued on, explaining his ability's mysterious reappearance.

Finally, he told her of the last week. He talked about his defense of the Diem at the Hall of Judgement, his two-week deadline, and his insecurities relating to his leadership. He talked optimistically about his task, but it was obvious to Khriss that his job was a nearly impossible one. She hadn't even been able to get the *Taishin* to see her, let alone get them to change their minds about such a monumental decision.

All this time I've been worrying about finding one man, while Kenton's been trying to save an entire Profession.

Then he explained why the Kershtians were trying to kill him. He spoke of Kershtian politics, of their three sub-sects and the way they chose a ruler. He told her of the A'Kar, their high priest, and why the man needed to kill Kenton. He told her that assassins would come after him every two days until he was either dead or he managed to find and kill their leader.

Last of all, he explained the challenge he had made to the man Drile. He told her of the duel, explaining with odd frankness that there wasn't much chance that he would be able to win.

Khriss leaned back in her sand-chair, exhausted from the length explanation. It was enough to sate even her curiosity.

And I thought my task was difficult…

"So, Khrissalla, that is who I am, what is going on, and why those Kershtians are trying to kill me." He'd said more than he'd intended—for some reason, it had all just come out. It felt good to have said it, however, even if the one he had said it to didn't really care for him all that much.

"I never imagined…" she mumbled. "I mean, I didn't know…"

"Any more questions?" he asked with a smile.

She shook her head.

"That's a first."

"So, what about the money?" she asked. "Weren't we going to try and…"

"Sands, I forgot!" Kenton said, standing. He changed to Lossandin, asking a question of his red-haired assistant. The boy

nodded, disappearing. A few moments later he returned with an elderly sand master in a yellow sash. Kenton spoke to him for a few moments, then looked back at Khriss.

"Elorin says he doesn't know what happened to the tribute money—the Lord Mastrell accepted it and did something with it."

"Which means it's probably lying around here somewhere," Khriss assumed.

"Probably," Kenton agreed, looking excited.

At precisely that moment, the door opened and Eric walked in, munching happily on what appeared to be some sort of flat-bread covered with frosting. He took a look at everyone in the room, and frowned slightly.

"All right, what did I miss?"

"We're going to ransack the Diem," Kenton explained. "Want to help?"

"Sure," Eric said, munching on his food. "What are we looking for?"

"Money," Kenton explained. "The mastrells left behind coins."

"Oh, sure," Eric said with a nod. "I could have told you that. How do you think I bought this?" He held up the pastry.

Kenton froze, looking down at the pastry with stupefied eyes. "You knew the mastrells left behind money?" he asked.

"Of course," Eric explained. "I found it on the first day. You did say I could help myself to one of the rooms, you know. I figured that included whatever I found in the desk drawers…"

"Show me," Kenton ordered.

Eric lead them to his room, which turned out very similar to Kenton's. It had the same sand-covered floor—Khriss assumed that was to facilitate sand mastery—and a similar scattering of furniture, including several of the sand-stuffed chairs.

Eric's main room had a smaller side-room just like Kenton's, and inside it was a desk. Eric proceeded to open the top drawer with a flowery gesture, then reached under and undid a hidden latch, which unlocked some mechanism that let him remove the entire drawer. He turned it over, turned a switch on the bottom, and opened a secret compartment in the back.

"There," he said dramatically.

Kenton knelt beside the drawer, eyeing the pile of coins inside.

There were some of the silvery hematite coins that Khriss recognized as 100 lak marks, but most of them were tiger-eye tens or blue marble fives.

Kenton did a mental calculation. “How much of it did you spend!” he accused.

Eric held up his hands. “Oh, about fifty lak or so.”

Kenton rubbed his chin in thought. “There isn’t as much as I expected,” he admitted. “This should have been accruing for years —even divided amongst twenty mastrells, there should be more money here.”

Eric shrugged. “Maybe the others have more. I checked a few rooms before I chose this one—most of them had desks like this one.”

Kenton stood with a nod. “All right,” he said. “Eric, you work on this side and move right. I’ll go left. Khriss, you take the rooms on the other side of the hallway and move right, Baon you can go left.”

“What?” Khriss huffed. “You’re giving me orders now?”

“You wanted to be part of what I was doing,” Kenton with a smile. “Well, you can take part. Go remove the desk drawers and bring them back to my rooms.”

He winked at her before walking from the room to begin his own search.

Khriss watched him go with an indignant snort.

“You did tell him you wanted to be part of what he was doing,” Baon noted from the side.

“You’re not helping,” she shot back. Finally, however, she complied, trying to ignore the smirk Kenton gave her when he saw her do as he had requested.

And just when I thought we were starting to get along! Khriss thought to herself. *That man is completely, totally, and utterly insufferable.*

Their ‘ransack’ of the Diem took considerably less time than Kenton had expected it would. It turned out that desks like the one in Eric’s rooms were standard issue for mastrells, and each one had a false-bottomed drawer where they had stored their coins.

As they searched, Kenton briefly considered how relatively unimaginative the mastrells had been. Each one of them hid their money in exactly the same place. But, that had been one of his big

complaints about the Diem's leadership—their closed-mindedness.

It felt odd, pillaging his own home. But, the mastrells didn't need their money any more, and it was going toward a good cause. In the end they gathered all the coins in the center of Kenton's room, piling them like a bandit's illicit hoard. There were fewer of them than Kenton had hoped—far fewer.

"About five thousand," Eric said, counting the last hundred-lak coin.

Kenton cursed. "That's a far cry from two-hundred thousand, isn't it?" he asked.

"You could say that," Eric said with a smirk.

"Two hundred thousand?" Khriss asked with amazement. "Two hundred thousand lak? That's how much you owe?"

Kenton nodded with a sigh. "I warned you it was big."

"The jewels I sold were only worth twenty thousand," Khriss said. "Two-hundred…"

Kenton sighed. "Elorin," he said in Lossandin, "how does the Diem pay its servants?"

"It… doesn't, Lord Mastrell," Elorin informed. "The Lord Artisan pays them."

"I thought as much," Kenton said. "Take this money, and tell the servants that we'll be paying them from now on. Use it to buy whatever the Diem needs over the next week."

"Yes, Lord Mastrell," Elorin agreed.

Kenton sat down, running his hands through his hair. "Well, thank you for the idea, Khriss, but I'm afraid it didn't turn out as I had hoped."

Khriss sat in one of his chairs, staring at the pile of coins, tapping her foot in annoyance. "If only we knew where your father's money went."

Kenton nodded. In every room they had found at least a few coins, with one noted exception. Praxton's desk had been empty. Kenton had searched through the room, poking at cupboards, rattling chests, searching for false backs on closets, but had found no luck. Praxton's stash of coins—if he had one—was nowhere to be found.

"He probably spent it," Eric mumbled.

"Where?" Kenton asked. "Everything is free."

“Not everything,” Eric said. “Mastrells can’t commandeer boats, for one thing.”

Kenton nodded. Kezare’s survival depended on shipping—the population was so large that daily shipments of food were necessary to keep it fed. In addition, boat hulls had to be constructed completely of wood—if they used carapace, the first dent or chip could end up sinking the entire vessel. So valuable were the boats that the Law has a clause excluding them from the mastrell’s ability to demand goods.

“True,” Kenton agreed, “but my father never traveled anywhere. Why would he spend money on a boat?”

Eric shrugged. “I’ve always thought sand masters were weird. Maybe he just felt like it.”

Kenton snorted.

“Or…” Eric said thoughtfully.

“What?”

Eric nodded at the chairs. “What about those?”

Kenton regarded the chair he was sitting in. “What do chairs have to do with boats?”

“Nothing,” Eric replied. “I’ve discarded the boat idea. Where do they make chairs like that?”

Kenton shrugged. “Denka?”

Eric nodded.

“Denka,” Kenton said, realizing what he had just said. “One of the Rim Kingdoms.”

“Where the sand masters have no legal rite to steal,” Eric said with a nod.

“Of course,” Kenton realized. That’s why the mastrells didn’t have as much money as he’d assumed—they might get goods in Kezare for free, but many of the most expensive items were foreign. They would have to use coin to commission those. “I should have thought of that.”

“It was a nice idea, though,” Eric said, regarding the pile of coins.

Kenton bid Khriss farewell, promising to meet her the next day and escort her to the Lord Admiral’s party. She left, feeling slightly despondent. For a brief time, Kenton had thought one of his problems solved, but in the end nothing had come of it. She kind of

felt guilty, as if the failure were her fault because she had made the comment that gave him the idea.

She and Baon climbed aboard the boat to Kezare with a subdued tone. Khriss rode in silence, reviewing what she had learned. Kenton wasn't as powerful as she had assumed—he was just doing the best he could with what he had. Just like her.

As she pondered, however, she realized something. Despite his lengthy explanation, Kenton had left out one topic. Sand mastery. He had told her almost nothing about the art itself—why it worked, how much a single person could lift, that sort of thing. He had told her that he wasn't very powerful, but had given no details about what that meant.

The best with what you have… What did she have? Not much—a curious mind and a dead fiancée. But, she was still on dayside, a massive undertaking in itself. She couldn't just head back to darkside—she felt as if she should do something while she was here. Some greater purpose.

And finally, she realized what it was. She had come to find Gevin, but what had he come to dayside to do? His quest had been much more selfless than her own; he had come for the sand mages, something only he believed were real. He had thought they would be able to help Elis against the Dynasty.

Well, the sand mages were real, and Khriss was coming to know one of them fairly well. She had seen what Kenton did today—that kind of power could be useful in the coming battle with Scythe.

Gevin, you were right! She realized with amazement. *The sand mages are the answer.*

The prince had been killed before he could fulfill his dream, so she would see it fulfilled for him. She would find out how sand mastery worked, and would bring the secret back with her to Elis.

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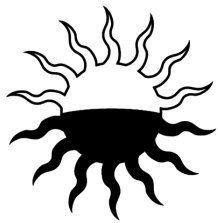


When Ais climbed up the short ladder on the side of his house, he left behind the world. He left behind the city; he left behind the markets, the hustle, the yelling, the confusion, the pain, and even the duty. He entered a realm that to one, insignificant man, was holy.

He walked reverently across the roof, wearing only a simple tan Kershtian robe. Here, away from Portside, the buildings were smaller, and his own home rose above those surrounding it. Quietly, he walked over to a battered trunk sitting by the roof's siderail. Thieves had likely seen the trunk and inspected its contents dozens of times—it bore not lock, and any with the determination could jump from a neighboring rooftop to open it.

Those who had done so had undoubtedly been disappointed.

Ais lifted the trunk's lid. It was filled with sand—normal, white sand. At least, to the casual observer that is how it would appear. Reverently, Ais removed the cloth mat that sat across the top of the sand, unrolling it on the ground before him. Then he took a scoop of sand in each hand and sprinkled it across the mat. Though it looked unremarkable, the chest of sand was perhaps the most valuable possession Ais owned. Years ago he himself had made the trek to the deep sands to fill it. This sand had been taken from holy ground.

Removing his shoes—a symbol of pagan Lossand—Ais knelt on the sand-strewn mat. Then he turned to face his God.

He knew, technically, that the sun was not the Sand Lord—it was only a manifestation of His divine presence. Still, the great orb was a reminder of the Sand Lord's power. As Ais knelt, his hands spread before him, his eyes closed, he could feel its power.

Heat bathed him. It warmed each breath he took, giving life to all of dayside. Its strength was acknowledged by every inch of Ais's skin. It was striking even through closed eyelids. As Ais knelt before it, the entire world seemed to grow silent and, for a moment, he was alone before the Sand Lord.

A'Kar A'Ker A'KerNaisha, he thought, the ritual opening to a prayer. *Ir'takasha N'Keemsha Kashaen'Heesth' Ker'Naisha'Totar.* I am unworthy before thee. *Kreen'Dakasha Nan'Mashainto.* Please grant me strength. *K'Klai'Dakasha Lron'Karashaor'Disha Dail'Teeshakar Ishao'Mashainto.* Please, oh please, let this experience end quickly.

Ais was beginning to wonder at his own closely-held beliefs. Could he really be both a trackt and a Kershtian? Twice now his role as Kenton's protector had forced him to fight people of his own race. That, in itself, was not a problem—Kershtians frequently fought one another. The problem was, he was forced to fight and kill men whose motivations he secretly applauded.

The Lord Mastrell deserved to die. It was cruel to consider, but it was the truth. Recently, the A'Kar had declared that Lossandin people who joined *Ker'reen* would be allowed to seek adoption into a Kershtian family. Traditionally, non-Kershtians who joined *Ker'reen* were still regulated to second-class blessings in the Sand Lord's eternal kingdom on the sun, servants to those of the true blood. For the first time in history, the Sand Lord's eternal blessings were available to all.

The declaration felt right to Ais—he had always believed it would occur. All men were equal before the Law, it made sense that they would all be equal before God. Only one thing remained a blight on Lossand—the sand masters. The A'Kar had recently hinted that if it weren't for the Diem, Lossand's high population of believers would earn the nation a holy status equal with that of the

kerla. Only Kenton stood in the way.

And Ais was responsible for keeping him alive. Perhaps that was why Ais's control seemed to be slipping more and more lately. He had found himself crying for no reason after the attack the day before—thankfully, he didn't think the sand master had seen him. His emotions seemed to be raging uncontrollably, threatening to burst free at any moment.

"Ais?" Mellis's voice rose to him as she climbed up the ladder. She knew that he rose early in the morning to pray when the moon was pointing directly east. He heard her footsteps pad across the roof, and she knelt beside him on the mat, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder.

There had always been three pillars of stability in Ais's life—God, Law, and family. Now two were fighting and the third was in danger. No wonder his control was slipping.

He sighed, lowering his head. "I don't know what is happening to me, Mellis," he whispered. "All my life, I have only wanted control, yet it seems to be the one thing that I will never obtain."

Mellis rested her head on his shoulder. "It will be all right, Ais," she promised. "Have you ever wondered if, perhaps, this is what the Sand Lord wants for you?"

He wants me to be a slobbering idiot, an imbecile with no control?

Ais shook his head. "I want you to leave Kezare," he whispered. "It isn't safe for you here."

"Ais I… is that really necessary?"

Ais nodded. "Sharezan is too powerful, Mellis. I can't protect you. Our raid on the boat races went wrong—he knew we were coming. He pulled out all of his money, and left a note for me. Tain delivered it."

Mellis's grip grew tighter.

"Take Melly and go," he urged. "Use our savings and buy passage on a ship to the south. Pick a town—don't tell me which one—go to the Hall of Judgement and tell them who you are. Request sanctuary, and stay there until you get word from the Hall Judge that Sharezan has been captured."

Mellis inhaled sharply. "Ais, that could take months!"

Ais shook his head. "We're close now, Mellis," he promised.

“This is the first time Sharezan has run from us. We’ve got half of his advisors in prison. His organization is close to falling apart—someone will get to him soon. If not us, then a rival.”

Mellis said nothing. He took her silence as assent.

He opened his eyes, leaning over to kiss her on the forehead. “I don’t know what the Sand Lord has planned for us,” he admitted. “But I will see Sharezan captured, no matter what other duties I have been given. I think I know who he is. But… if you hear word that I have died, do not come back to Kezare unless the Hall Judge assures you they found my body.”

“You’re doing the right thing,” Eric approved.

Eric ignored the comment, continuing to pack his things.

“You’re not abandoning him,” Eric continued. “He doesn’t even need you, really.”

Eric continued to pack, stuffing the rest of his clothing in the bag. He paused, however, shooting a look over his shoulder. A look toward Kenton’s rooms.

“Aren’t you listening to me?” Eric demanded.

Eric turned, looking at himself in the mirror. He looked very indignant.

“You have no purpose here. You’re useless. What do you do? Eat Kenton’s food and make the occasional sarcastic comment? He doesn’t need you.”

Eric looked over the rooms that had been his for the last six days. Only six days. It hadn’t been very long.

“You spoke with your father,” Eric continued. “You did what you came here to do. Now, it’s time to get moving again. You know what happens when you don’t keep moving.”

Eric nodded solemnly.

“Good, I’m glad we agree. Now keep packing.”

Eric moved to comply, stuffing his remaining possessions into his darkside canvas bag. He paused on the last one, however, a polished carapace scabbard. It was a simple thing, inscribed with the crossed spears that were the symbol of the Tower. Chipped with age, the scabbard was hardly the finest possession he had ever owned. It was, however, one of the most precious.

“You think he won’t to it again?” Eric warned with a spiteful whisper.

Eric didn't know why he had kept the scabbard all these years—Kenton probably didn't even remember giving it to him. Yet, he could still hear the youthful Kenton's voice in his mind. *You'll be Lord General, and I'll be Lord Mastrell. Think of what we'll do!*

"All these years, he still thinks it was your father who drove you away," Eric continued. "He doesn't have any clue. You think he has changed, but he hasn't. He will still find a way to use you in his plans, in his schemes. He cares nothing for others—he is selfish. All he cares about is his fight, his success, his arguments. He doesn't even pay attention to what he does to those around him."

This time, however, Eric's cajoling failed. Eric knew better. If Kenton hadn't offered himself as a sacrifice, if he hadn't, for once in his life, done something noble, Eric could have believed him the same person—no matter how solemn he had become. The offer to fight Drile, however, changed things.

He's going to need me, Eric thought, slowly beginning to unpack his bag.

"You are an idiot," Eric warned.

Eric continued to unpack.

"He'll use you," Eric warned. "Before this week is out, all you have striven to become will be lost. You'll return to the way you were before—an automaton, ordered around by the will of others.

Eric continued to unpack.

"And that won't be the end," Eric warned. "Then it will happen. What you always feared. You'll not only follow them, you'll become like them. You will take control of the lives of others. You'll give the orders, and they will follow you. They will die for you. Can you handle that, Eric? The responsibility. The pain…"

This gave Eric pause. His eyes shot over toward the scabbard, sitting on one of the room's chairs. He had thrown the sword away long ago. He should have done the same with the scabbard.

With a sigh, he finished his unpacking.

"You're a fool," Eric warned.

"I know," Eric agreed.

Khriss's rooms had undergone a massive transformation over the last twelve hours. Her beauty products lay in a jumble on the floor, and the table which had held them now sat next to the far wall. Beside it stood her night stand and the bench-like table from Baon's

room.

Upon this extended group of tables sat a jumble of instruments, ledgers, and glass containers of all sizes. Khriss's scientific equipment, packed carefully before her departure and nearly forgotten in all that had happened, had finally been remembered.

On her walls she had pinned charts of the moon's turnings, as seen from darkside. She intended to make similar charts from dayside, measuring the moon's distance from the horizon during different times of day, a method that would eventually let her test Dovendel's postulated circumference of the planet.

Beside the mooncharts she had pinned several maps of dayside she had sent N'Teese to purchase for her. On one of these she had marked the route her expedition had taken, as closely as she could estimate. Another chart listed the days she had been on dayside, along with columns for measured windspeed, temperature, and barometer. She couldn't, of course, make such measurements for the days that had passed, but starting now was better than never.

At the far end of the table lay a series of drawings, detailing every sandling she could remember seeing. They were on large sheets of black dayside paper—she had found the oily writing utensils of the continent very easy to draw with. The pictures were waiting for N'Teese to return with a hotplate to bind the ink to the paper.

Several glass jars contained smaller sandlings, ranging from as small as Khriss's thumbnail to one as big as her fist. Some of the city boys had gladly caught them for her earlier in the day, especially when she promised them a half-lak coin for each one they brought her.

In the direct center of the conglomeration of beakers, charts, books, and instruments, sat Khriss, her eye pressed to the eyepiece of a microscope. A small oil-burning lamp provided light to be focused and reflected against or above the bottom plate, by which she was able to make her discovery.

"Look at this!" she said energetically.

There was, of course, no one to hear her. So, she repeated her exclamation louder. A few moments Baon appeared at the doorway.

"Baon, look at this!" she urged, pulling her chair away from the microscope.

He approached with a raised eyebrow.

“Look in the top of the microscope,” Khriss urged. “Like it was a spyglass.”

Baon did so, squinting as he bent down to look through the microscope.

“All right,” Khriss said. “Now look at this.” She reached over, changing the glass plate at the bottom of the microscope. “See?” she asked.

“No,” Baon informed, standing up.

“Didn’t they look the same to you?” Khriss asked.

Baon shrugged. “Similar.”

“Only similar?” Khriss asked.

“They were different shapes,” Baon explained.

Khriss sighed. “Why am I talking to you? Where’s Cynder?”

“Right here, My Lady,” Cynder said, entering the room. “I heard you all the way from downstairs.”

Khriss pushed Baon away, urging Cynder to approach. “Here,” she said, pointing at the microscope. “What do you see?”

Cynder bent over, squinting into the microscope. “I would say a piece of carapace,” he guessed.

“Right,” Khriss said, switching plates again. “Now look at this.”

“The same, My Lady.”

“No,” Khriss said with a smile. “That is sand.”

“Sand?” Cynder asked with interest. “Surely not.”

“Here,” Khriss said, “look at this.” She gestured him over to three piles of sand. One was white, one black, and the final one a crystalline brownish color. “What do you see?”

“The first is regular dayside sand,” Cynder answered. “The second is dayside sand that has had water poured on it, and the third is darkside sand.”

“Right except for one,” Khriss corrected. “The last one is dayside sand too. That is sand that has been eaten by a sandling and excreted.”

“Sandling feces?” Cynder asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Kind of,” Khriss admitted. “The point is, Cynder, that the sand which has passed through a sandling’s gullet looks just like darkside sand. Don’t you see? There is nothing odd about dayside sand—it has the same silicate structure as what we have on darkside. The

difference in color doesn't come from composition, but from something that covers it."

"Covers it. . . ?" Cynder said, frowning.

"A kind of film," Khriss explained enthusiastically. "Very thin, but very resilient. Apparently it grows or accumulates on the surface of the sand. If you pour water on it, it turns black. If a sandling eats the sand, however…"

"The film gets digested," Cynder said with a nod, stepping aside as Baon peered into the microscope again. "I had wondered how all these sandlings survived by eating sand."

"What you were looking at in the microscope was some of this film that I scraped off of black sand," Khriss explained. "I've got some white scrapings too—they seem identical except for the color. What we have to do now is figure out what it is."

"It looks like carapace," Baon mumbled.

Khriss paused. "What?" she asked.

"Carapace," Baon said, standing up straight. "Those flecks look like little bits of carapace."

Khriss frowned, leaning over to look again. He did have a point—the black scrapings did look a little bit like carapace.

"Lichen grows all over the place back on darkside," Baon theorized. "Maybe its the same sort of thing, only a dayside version."

"That would make it a living creature, dear Baon," Cynder said with a chuckle. "Besides, lichen needs water to survive. I hardly think that—"

"No, Cynder," Khriss said, still looking through the microscope. Perhaps Baon wasn't has hopeless scientifically as she had presumed. "He might be right. Sandlings don't seem to need water to live, so maybe this lichen doesn't either. We might be looking at the ultimate ancestor of all life on dayside!"

"Well, perhaps," Cynder admitted. "A lichen that adheres to silicate surfaces.… It would grow very slowly, but with enough time, and with so much sand…"

"It isn't exactly the same as carapace," Khriss said, moving to put out the oil lamp. "For instance, it doesn't melt when you pour water on it—I already tried. There is, however, something of a reaction. Here, watch this. Baon, would you please cover the

grundlefish?”

Baon complied, placing the covering cloths over the fish globes. In the darkness, Khriss picked up a vial of water and moved over next to one of her piles of white sand.

“Watch closely,” she said, and poured the water on the sand.

As she did so, there was a slight flash of light. It was weak, but in the room’s blackness it was easily perceptible.

“The lights, Baon,” Khriss requested.

He complied, revealing a very interested Cynder.

“The sand releases light when water touches it,” he mused.

“Yes,” Khriss agreed with an energetic smile. “But, there’s something more. What color was the light you saw?”

Cynder frowned. “I don’t really know. It passed quickly.”

“Was it white?” Khriss prodded.

“No,” Baon said suddenly.

Khriss looked up with surprise. The warrior stood with an interested look on his face.

“It was… shifting,” Baon continued. “Radiant, like shimmering water or…”

“Mother of pearl?” Khriss asked.

“I suppose you could call it that,” Baon agreed. “A kind of soft rainbow, scaled toward lighter colors. I’ve seen its color before.”

Khriss nodded. “It is the exact color—or combination thereof—given off by sand that a sand master is controlling. What’s more, when a sand master is done using sand, it turns black, just like this.”

“But what does it mean?” Cynder asked.

“I don’t know,” Khriss said, still enthusiastic. “But it is encouraging. Don’t you see? We can take this sand back to darkside with us! We can grow the lichen on our own sand, and use it like the sand masters do.”

Cynder was rubbing a bit of the wet sand between his fingers, regarding it with a critical eye. “So, what makes the sand white again?”

Khriss paused. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “But I’ve only been working on it for one day. I intend to find out how this works, Cynder, and when I bring it back to Elis with me, we’ll have a weapon Scythe has never even heard of!”

“A worthy goal, duchess,” Cynder approved. “It was Prince Gevalden’s dream, was it not?”

“Yes, it was,” Khriss said. “No one believed him… not even me. I intend to make up for that.”

Cynder nodded with a smile. “May the Divine watch over you, My Lady,” he said, turning to go. Baon moved to join him.

“Baon, please wait a moment,” Khriss requested.

Baon paused, turning with a question on his face. Outside she could hear Cynder speaking with Acron, who had apparently been coming up to see what everyone was doing.

“Baon, you’re from Iiaria, correct?” Khriss asked.

The large warrior nodded.

“Have you ever seen Scythe himself?” she asked.

“Occasionally,” Baon said.

“What does he look like?” Khriss asked.

“An Iiarian, like myself,” Baon explained. “Tall, with very dark skin. He is a powerful man, duchess. Very powerful—and not just because of what he controls. He bears himself like a warrior, with a firm stance and commanding presence. And, of course, his Skycolor is violet—the color of nobility.”

Khriss sat back in her chair, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. She had always assumed the tales of Scythe’s power were superstitions, but she had assumed the same about the sand masters.

“Is it true what they say about him, Baon?” she asked. “About his… abilities?”

“His magic?” Baon asked. “Yes.”

Khriss felt herself grow cold. She had always known Elis stood against a monster and a despot, but she had taken comfort in the fact that their enemy was a man, just like every other man. A man capable of being defeated.

“Are you… certain?” she asked.

“Duchess,” Baon explained. “When I was a young boy, Scythe looked like a man in his mid-twenties. He looked exactly the same the day I left Iiaria. The histories say he is hundreds of years old, and I believe them. I have seen him do things impossible of any normal man.”

“You always believed we would find the sand mages, didn’t you?” Khriss asked curiously.

Baon nodded.

"But you didn't argue with me? Correct me when I assumed they were a myth?"

"You wouldn't have listened to me," Baon said simply.

"No," Khriss said with a sigh. "I probably wouldn't have. Thank you, Baon."

The warrior nodded, turning to leave the room. Khriss watched him go with a slight frown. *What else aren't you telling me, Baon? What else do you keep hidden because you assume I wouldn't believe you?*

Suddenly, Acron's concerns from before resurfaced. She couldn't suspect Baon of wishing her harm—he had proven his loyalty too much for that. But, she couldn't help wondering how much of the truth he was telling her.

She didn't know what she sensed—somehow she knew he was hiding something. It came from the way he held himself, the way he answered questions. The odd thing was, most of her suspicions came because of his teachings. If he hadn't trained her to be more observant…

What are you hiding, Baon?

You've realized what you did wrong, now you just have to realize what you did right. Somewhere in the middle is who you really are.

Eric's words, spoken almost absently, continued to pick at Kenton's mind. Who was Kenton really? Was he the rebel who had been Praxton's nemesis all those years? He hoped not—he had discovered recently how many problems that person had. But, was he the Lord Mastrell? Was he a man who was bound by tradition and Laws, a mysterious force that watched Lossand with a manipulative eye? He didn't like that idea either. Laws were important, true, but so was change.

So what was he? Was he the martyr, like Eric claimed? A man determined to see himself killed, even if such extreme measures weren't required? He didn't think so. Drile would probably kill him, that was true, but he wasn't going to blindly walk to the sacrifice without a fight.

Who am I?

He leaned against his balcony—repaired now, even though he

couldn't remember asking anyone to take care of it for him. Across the way he could see Drile lounging on his own balcony, surrounded by a group of attendants. The former mastrell waved toward Kenton with a flippant gesture, poking one of his comrades and inciting a laugh with some unheard comment.

Kenton's plan had worked, at least. Since the challenge a few days ago, Drile had stopped his paranoid ravings and his attempts to undermine Kenton's power. The former mastrell acted happy whenever he saw Kenton, obeying any commands with overdone bows. Occasionally, Drile spoke of things he would do once he became Lord Mastrell—he even had the gall to ask Kenton his opinion on some of the ideas.

Kenton looked away from Drile in disgust. Unfortunately, the turn made his eyes fall on the solitary conference chamber in the middle of the courtyard—the Pit, as the sand masters had resumed calling it. The other sand masters, acolent and elder alike, now walked with a careful step around Kenton—like they would before a condemned man.

The conference chamber stared up at him. From his vantage he could see through its open top, catching sight of the circular stone benches that ran coliseum-like around a central patch of sand, perhaps forty-feet across. It looked like a pit, not unlike the sandling fighting arenas that were popular in the Rim Kingdoms. He remembered playing in it as a child, sneaking in with Eric to a place they shouldn't have been. They had been caught, of course. He hadn't gotten in trouble—his father had ignored him when possible. Eric hadn't been so lucky. Reegent didn't like to be embarrassed.

For some reason, the memory from long ago sparked something Kenton. He remembered what it was like to be a child in the Diem. Eight years ago he had stood in the dust-blown *kerla*, insisting that his father let him become a sand master. Back then, his reasons hadn't been spiteful. He really had believed he deserved to be a sand master—at first, he had even believed he deserved to be a mastrell.

Kenton smiled, leaning against the carapace banister. He remembered the laughter of the other acolents—Drile at their head. But, for some reason, the memory brought him no pain. He hadn't been humiliated by the other's scorn, he had only worked harder.

Pressing himself to learn more, to become a better sand master. By age thirteen he had been able to do more with one ribbon than any sand master in history. It hadn't been until after his first advancement ceremony, where he had been offered the lowest of ranks, that he had started to grow bitter.

That was who he wanted to be. The boy, the optimistic child who had sincerely believed himself worthy of the Diem's highest honor. That boy who had stood on the sands, defying his father not because of hatred or desire for attention, but because of his convictions—naïve though they had been.

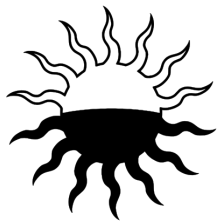
Kenton wanted to be that child, a child who had enjoyed being different instead of cursing his weakness. He had amplified his unique traits—not because he wanted others to notice him, but because he simply liked mastering sand.

He was a mastrell, and he did deserve to be one. He might not be like any other mastrell who had ever lived, but he would prove himself a good one nonetheless. Kenton stood, smiling to himself.

Where do I start? He wondered. *How do I return to what I was?* The answer came immediately, though it was a very odd one. It was a memory from his childhood, something he had once sworn to do when he became a mastrell. He had always hated sand master robes. As a child, his mother had dressed him in darksider clothing. He hadn't liked that either—they had been too constrictive. He wanted something different, something new.

Walking over to his desk, Kenton removed a couple hundred-lak coins he had kept from the pile they had discovered the day before. It was time to go shopping.

– 25 –



Khriss hurried to get ready. She had spent too much time on her studies, inspecting the different sandlings her young helpers had recovered, and now she was late. Kenton had said he would arrive at ninth hour, which meant she barely had thirty darkside minutes to get ready.

She mulled over her choices, considering the different items hanging in her closet. Idan was an absolute marvel—he had managed to press all of her darkside dresses, removing the horrible wrinkles caused by four months of travel. But, dared she wear any of them? They were modest by darkside standards, but she had yet to see a woman on dayside whose robes weren't bulky and form-hiding.

Of course, she had her own robes. Perhaps she should wear one of them instead. The more she considered it, however, the more she leaned toward one of the darkside dresses. So far, her reception on dayside had been less than encouraging—why was she worried about reputation? Besides, for some reason she was feeling daring. Gevin had always been forced to pry her away from her studies to attend balls, but the truth was she had enjoyed them. Or, at least, she had enjoyed being at them with him.

Nodding to herself decisively, she pulled out her most flamboyant, bold outfit, a sleek form-fitting, bright red dress. It was

completely different from everything she had seen on dayside. Not only was the neckline dangerously low, but it also had a slit up one side. She blushed when she thought of what the dayside men would think, but at the same time she found herself smiling evilly. The outfit wasn't too risqué by Elisian standards, and she was a duchess of Elis. Why should she pretend to be what she was not?

She put the dress on, then moved over the mirror to do something with her hair. The dayside women always kept the hoods of their robes up—they obviously didn't know what they could accomplish with a little stiff-cream and creative braiding. Khriss went to work, silently cursing the fact that she didn't have a ladyservant to help her.

Eventually, she chose a hairstyle that looked more difficult to produce than it actually was, with half of her hair braided around the top of her head, the other half spilling out like a dark waterfall over her left shoulder.

Too bad I can't use my Skycolor here, she thought absently, choosing a few pieces of jewelry. She didn't normally wear much, but this was a special occasion. A matching gold necklace and bracelet set with small rubies eventually won. It was part of what she had brought to sell if necessary, but with what gemstones were worth on this side of the world, she probably wouldn't have to.

As she worked, she noticed something hanging forgotten in her closet. The current fashion in darkside was to wear matching shawl-waistribbon combinations with dresses. The waistribbons looked kind of like translucent version of sand master sashes, and she did have a golden one…

With a smile, Khriss tied on the golden waistribbon and threw the shawl over her bare shoulders. She wouldn't need it in this heat, but the gold did make a nice compliment to the red dress.

A knock came at the door, followed by Idan's voice. "He has arrived, My Lady."

Khriss took a deep breath and, after hurriedly giving her makeup a final look-over, left her room She walked down the hallway, oddly excited.

It's only Kenton, she reminded herself. *It isn't like he asked you to go with him. He was told to bring you.* Still, despite that knowledge, she felt her heart fluttering nervously as she

approached the top of the staircase.

All of her life, it had been assumed that if she had somewhere to go, she would go there with Gevin. Now, suddenly, that expectation was gone, and she wasn't certain what she should think anymore. However, the more time that passed, the more she realized that Baon had been right. She had known all along that she would find Gevin dead. She had made the expedition as much for herself as for him, to free herself from the wondering. In a way, she had spent the last two years grieving, and now that weight had suddenly been lifted.

Kenton stood below, along with his Kershtian guard. Khriss smiled with satisfaction as they saw her—the dress had the desired effect. The Kershtian, of course, looked away immediately, muttering something Khriss couldn't hear. Kenton, however, just stared at her, his eyes opening slightly wider. His gaze followed her all the way down the staircase.

"I trust you're not going to get me killed today," she asked as she reached the bottom.

Kenton started slightly, as if realizing for the first time what he had been doing. "Um, no," he said, regaining his composure. "They can only attack me every other day—or, at least, that is what Ais claims."

Khriss nodded, regarding the man who would be her escort for the event and noticing for the first time that she wasn't the only one who had paid special attention to attire this day.

"You're not wearing robes!" Khriss said with surprise.

Kenton looked down. "No, I never really like them. I decided that if I'm Lord Mastrell, then I should at least be able to choose what I wear."

The outfit was loose-fitting enough that it could have been robes, which was why Khriss hadn't noticed it at first. Kenton wore a pair of white trousers, cut after darkside fashion but broader through the legs. The pants ran all the way down to his cloth-wrapped shoes, pulling in at the ankle and then tucking underneath upon itself—probably to keep the sand out. His shirt was a little-bit tighter, but still loose by darkside standards. Its wide sleeves went all the way to his wrists where they too tucked in upon themselves. Over it all was a long white cloak and, of course, he wore the

golden sash around his waist.

"What do you think?" he asked. She detected a hint of nervousness in his voice.

"I've never seen anything like it," Khriss confessed. "Where did you get it?"

"I went into town and had it made today," Kenton explained. "I'll tell you, the poor Kershtian seamstress must have thought I was daft. Of course, I'm a sand master, so she would have thought that no matter what I did."

"It fits," Khriss decided. He certainly cut a more imposing figure in the outfit—it was more sleek than the average robes, and would stand out. One thing, however, was wrong. His hair. Like always, it simply lay where it would, sticking out at awkward angles. It was the standard style for Lossandin men, who kept their hair short rather than in twin Kershtian braids. As a whole, the men on dayside seemed to take little care for how their hair looked.

"Follow me," Khriss ordered, turning to walk back up the stairs.

"Excuse me?" Kenton asked. When she didn't respond he sighed and followed.

She led him to her room, where she pointed at the chair before her vanity. "Sit," she said, turning to rifle through some of her beauty products.

Kenton paused in the doorway, eyeing the grundlefish with interest. "I'm not certain if I should trust you or not," he informed.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Khriss replied, pulling out a jar of stiff-cream. "Sit down."

Kenton complied, watching her with curious eyes as she unscrewed the lid and dipped her fingers in, removing a generous scoop of stiff-cream and rubbing it into his hair. "If you're going to accompany me," she informed, "then you're going to have to look respectable."

"Respectable by whose standards?" Kenton asked shaking his head slightly as he smirked.

"Stop that," Khriss ordered, working with his hair. What kind of look did she want? Not too formal, because he was still young. She needed a style that was… dashing. Like she imagined a sand mage would wear. She fiddled for a few minutes, eventually molding the hair into a style that was more structured than what most Lossand

men wore, but at the same time a little bit wild, the hair pulling forward into hundreds of spike-like strands that jutted out from his forehead then eventually curved down like curling waves.

"Don't you think that's a bit overly-dramatic?" Kenton asked as she finished.

"You're the one who is wearing a cape," Khriss informed.

"It's not a cape," Kenton said, blushing slightly. "It's a sand cloak. Lots of people wear them to keep their clothing from getting too dirty."

"Yes," Khriss agreed. "And do they wear them open at the front?"

"Well, no," Kenton admitted.

"Then it's a cape," Khriss said, wiping off her hands. "It's all right—you're a sand master. You should stand out from a crowd—you can get away with more extreme styles."

"If you say so," Kenton mumbled, studying himself in the mirror. "All right," he finally decided. "Let's go—the invitation said the ball was in my honor, whatever that means. I should probably try to avoid being too late."

As they left the house, Khriss paused.

What now? Kenton wondered. *Has she decided that I need a manicure too?*

"Where's N'Teese?" Khriss asked.

Baon shrugged. "I haven't seen her today."

"I told her to be here," Khriss said indignantly.

"Don't worry," Kenton assured, pushing open the door. "I'll translate for you."

Khriss paused, eyeing him speculatively.

"We're going to be late," Kenton reminded. It was only a slight untruth—he had noticed that Khriss and the other darksiders paid a lot more attention to time than most people on dayside. When the Lord Admiral's invitation said 'tenth hour', it really meant sometime around tenth hour.

Khriss, however, preferred exactness, and so his comment had the desired effect. She sighed, walking out of the house, leading Baon and Ais behind her. The Kershtian trackt still refused to look directly at Khriss, and Kenton had to chuckle as he noticed the man staring at the ground as he walked out directly behind her. Of

course, at the same time he empathized with the Kershtian.

It wasn't that Khriss's dress showed that much more skin than dayside equivalents—though no dayside woman would have gone about with her arms uncovered all the way up the shoulder. More distracting than what the dress revealed, however, was what it hinted at. It was a great deal… tighter than anything a woman would wear on dayside. That, combined with her exotic dark skin and long, unbound hair, produced a truly captivating sight.

"Are you coming, Lord Mastrell?" Khriss said, standing in the street with a slight smile on her lips.

Kenton started, realizing he was still holding the open door. *Silly fool,* he thought, shutting the door and walking toward her. *It's just Khriss—why are you acting so simple-minded?*

"I'll get you for this," he muttered as he joined her.

"Oh, you like the dress?" she asked with a sly look on her face.

Kenton snorted. "Let's just say its… different. Interesting choice of sashes, by the way."

Khriss's eyes flashed toward her waist, and the wide lace ribbon tied around it. "I thought we should match," she replied.

"Well, one thing is for certain," Kenton said with a chuckle. "Between the two of us, we'll probably cause quite a stir at Delious's party."

Khriss frowned slightly. "What kind of man is this Lord Admiral? He is a military figure, I assume?"

Kenton shook his head. "The term 'admiral' is probably a poor translation in your language. The Helm, Profession of sailors, is more mercantile than anything else. Of course, a lot of Lossand is like that. Assuming Lord Delious invites the customary people to his party, you'll meet quite a few 'generals' who have never seen a day of battle. High ranks in most of the professions—especially the Helm, Tower, and the Field—comes from doing well financially."

"But, if they are all merchants, who is the Lord Merchant?"

"Lord Moneychanger would probably be a better title," Kenton explained as they arrived at one of the exits from darkside town. "The Guild is a Profession for moneychangers and lenders. They fund most of the other Profession's undertakings, but they rarely do any trading themselves—except maybe dealing in real estate."

Khriss nodded, slipping on her dark spectacles as she stepped

into the light. She stood there, as if expecting something, as Kenton began to walk in the direction of the *kelzi* district.

"We're walking there?" Khriss asked incredulously.

Kenton paused. "Of course. Why not?"

"I just thought…" she trailed off, sighing as she regarded the street. She began to move forward, the back of her foot sinking into the first patch of sand she crossed, nearly making her trip.

"You're wearing those shoes again, aren't you," Kenton said, putting his hands on his hips.

"They go with the dress," Khriss snapped, trying to walk again, only to nearly twist her ankle as she hit a crack in the stone.

"Why would anyone wear something that silly?" Kenton wondered aloud, walking over to help her free her heel from the crack. Already people were stopping around them, men openly gawking at Khriss, others noticing Kenton and growing white-faced as they recognized the Lord Mastrell.

Maybe she has a point, Kenton decided. "Wait here," he said, ordering his sand to life and jumping into the air.

He soared up, landing himself on the top of a nearby building and scanning the streets below. Many *kelzin* preferred to use carriages rather than walking—Kenton, like most Lossanders, considered them a waste of time. Kezare was busy enough that walking was usually faster. Now, however, he was beginning to realize why such things might be necessary.

He spotted a carriage a few streets away, and its open-topped back was empty, so Kenton decided to give it a try. He dropped himself three stories to land inside the back of the moving carriage—startling the poor driver.

"My Lord!" exclaimed the driver, a Lossandin man with what appeared to be a lame leg.

"You wouldn't happen to be free for hire, would you?" Kenton asked hopefully.

The man lowered his eyes nervously. "Yes, My Lord. Um, where should I take you?"

"Excellent," Kenton said with a nod. "First we need to pick up my friends. How much do you charge for a day?"

"Charge, My Lord?" the man asked. "But, you're…"

"I'd still rather pay," Kenton said amiably. "If that's all right

with you."

"Um, certainly, My Lord. Three lak then." The man frowned as Kenton counted out the coins and handed them to him. He acted as if it were one of the strangest things he had seen.

At first, Khriss thought the approaching object was one massive sandling. As it approached, however, she realized it was just one of the carriages. She had seen them occasionally in town; they were fashioned completely from carapace plates, uniformly black except for the rims of the wheels, which were made of steel. Two very large tonks pulled the contraption—more like a cart than a carriage—and Kenton lounged in the back.

"Your carriage, My Lady."

Khriss raised an eyebrow as it pulled to a stop in front of her. She waited expectantly, but Kenton just sat in the back and waited.

"Well?" he asked.

"It is customary to help a lady into a carriage," Khriss informed.

"All right," Kenton said with a shrug.

About that time she realized her mistake.

Kenton's sand grabbed her under the arms and lifted her into the air. She yelped in surprise before he smoothly placed her on the seat next to him. Baon and Ais climbed into the front pair of seats, and the carriage began to move.

Khriss ignored Kenton's self-satisfied smirk as the vehicle made its way through the city. They headed west, and the street crowds thinned drastically as they approached the richer section of town. By the time they had passed over the wide bridge that separated the larger island from the small one, there was almost no one to be seen. Their carriage approached an enormous mansion with a columned stone front. Several carriages like the one they rode in sat out front of the building, and Khriss could see forms climbing out of them.

"What should I expect?" Khriss asked as the carriage pulled to a stop.

"Honestly, I don't know," Kenton confessed. "I've never been to one of these before. I would expect there to be a lot of *kelzin*, most of them trying to work some sort of deal with the others."

"Business?" Khriss asked. "At a party?"

"Parties are only excuses," Kenton explained. "Lossandin people,

like Kershtians, like to make business contracts in an informal setting."

"Will there be dancing?"

Kenton frowned. "Dancing? Why? Most of the people will already be married."

"Because…" Khriss trailed off with a sigh. "Never mind." *Why am I even here? I don't need to search for Gevin any more.*

She could, however, work on her second goal. The man beside her held a power that could be the key to defeating the Dynasty. She needed to find out how that power worked.

Kenton climbed from the carriage, then offered his hand to Khriss, helping her down.

"You know," she said, her voice suddenly loosing its edge, "since we're here together, we might as well act like we get along." She reached over and took his arm, composing herself and smiling sweetly as one of Delious's servant's approached.

Sands, she's fickle, Kenton thought with a shake of his head. One moment she's shooting him angry looks for 'helping' her into the carriage, the next moment she's hanging off his arm.

"My Lord," the servant said, bowing. "The Lord Admiral awaits you in the sand gardens behind the house."

Kenton nodded, gesturing for the servant to lead onward. Secretly, however, he was growing a bit nervous. He hadn't been lying when he told Khriss he didn't know what to expect—he had never been to this sort of event before. His tension mounted as they rounded Delious's mansion and walked toward a large series of tents to the building's rear. Other couples were being led along as well, most of them richly dressed in colorful robes and jewelry. Of course, none of the colors could match the deep redness of Khriss's dress—whatever dyes they had on darkside, they were much more vibrant than those of dayside.

What will they expect of me? Confrontation he could handle, but mingling? For some reason he found the concept daunting.

"Stop it," Khriss said from beside him.

"Stop what?"

"Stop being so tense."

"I'm not tense," Kenton lied.

Khriss snorted quietly. "They'll sense if you're intimidated,"

Khriss warned. “These people might not be called noblemen after the darkside sense, but they’re basically the same thing. To them, a person’s sense of superiority determines how much respect they deserve. Be confident.”

Kenton took a deep breath. “If you say so,” he said.

“I do,” Khriss replied. “If everything else fails, just start throwing around some of that sand of yours. It’s bound to intimidate the others.”

Kenton smiled. “That, and probably get me excluded from every other guest list in town.”

“Then you won’t have to worry about parties any more, will you?” Khriss asked with a smirk.

“I suppose not.”

“My Lord?” the servant asked in Lossandin as they arrived at the tent. “Your men may wait in the servant’s tent.”

“My men?” Kenton asked with surprise. “Oh, Baon and Ais.” He turned, looking back at the two men. Baon was already walking toward the servants tent—he might not understand the language, but he obviously had experience with similar events. Ais, however, was obviously not about to go join the servants.

Kenton wasn’t certain what to do. His invitation had only mentioned himself and Khriss. Would it be inappropriate to bring Ais in as well? Fortunately, the trackt solved the problem for him by whipping out his own invitation.

“I will be attending instead of the Lady Judge,” he informed. “She regrets that she is unable to make it today.”

The servant accepted the invitation with a raised eyebrow, then nodded. “I apologize, My Lord,” he said, pulling aside the cloth entrance to the tents.

The inside of the large pavilion was well-lit by openings in the ceiling. It was filled with people, most of whom wore the wheel-shaped symbol of the Helm sewn into their robes over the left shoulder. It made sense that the Helm would be well-represented, but there were *kelzin* from the Field, the Tower, and the Guild as well.

The entire room fell silent as Kenton and Khriss stepped in. There was a long pause, conversations dying, while everyone looked over the couple. Kenton’s eyes flickered toward Khriss, who

stood regarding the expressions with confident, even defiant eyes. She met gazes square on, smiling prettily all the way, as the two began to walk into the room.

Kenton looked forward again, trying to mimic her stance. In a way, he felt like he was at some sort of trial, a defendant being judged not on his testimony, but on his appearance. As soon as the thought occurred to him, Kenton felt his own confidence begin to grow. He probably wouldn't do much arguing this night, but it would be a struggle nonetheless. A struggle to prove himself. That he could do.

"Lord Mastrell!" a slurred voice called excitedly. "I'd feared you wouldn't come! What an interesting choice of clothing—much more fashionable than those robes."

The Lord Admiral stood near the back of the tent, speaking with a group of *kelzin* with suffering looks on their faces—looks that said they wished to the sands that they could be somewhere else, but feared leave lest one of their competitors gain an unnoticed upper hand. Delious was his usual wine-sodden self, dressed in bright plumb robes that nearly hid the wine stains. He made an exaggerated gesture toward Kenton, his motions breaking the tent's silence and prompting the *kelzin* back into their conversations. Delious didn't give them much time to speculate, however. He stepped forward, calling for silence again.

Kenton waited apprehensively as the Lord Admiral arranged his robes for a moment, then accepted a cup of wine from his steward —the same man that had attended him before. This he raised high in Kenton's direction, sloshing wine over the lip of the cup and onto the sand floor.

"I have an announcement to make!" Delious informed in a loud voice. "I have called this gathering for a specific purpose—or, rather, a specific person. I wish to pronounce my formal support to the Lord Mastrell in the upcoming vote. Let the Helm be the first to extend our hand to our sand master brethren in their time of need."

And with that, the Lord Admiral promptly passed out, dropping his cup to the floor as he collapsed to the ground.

"That is the Lord Admiral?" Khriss asked with amazement as the man collapsed to the floor.

Kenton just shook his head, looking both amused and

embarrassed. “Delious. The only man in Lossand who could collapse drunk before the party even begins.”

“He’s… I mean, that is…” Khriss trailed off—she wasn’t even sure what it was. Disgraceful? Irresponsible? No wonder N’Teese had called the Lord Admiral the least important of the Taisha.

“I know,” Kenton said with a nod. “Still, he did just give me a vote, so I suppose I should be grateful.”

“He wasn’t going to support you before.”

“He was… uncertain,” Kenton explained. “Delious always votes in opposition to the rest of the Council, especially the Lord Merchant. Just a few days ago he told me he would follow that exact pattern, voting for me only if Lord Vey voted against me.” Kenton’s eyes were speculative as he watched several servants tow Lord Delious over to the side of the tent and prop him up on some cushions. A few moments later, they succeeded in waking the man back up. “I wonder what made him change his mind,” Kenton said thoughtfully.

“Whatever it was, your *kelzin* don’t like it,” Khriss noticed, looking over the crowd. Many of them looked embarrassed, but a more prevalent emotion seemed to be loathing. The *kelzin* of the Helm were not pleased with this announcement.

Kenton and Khriss still stood near where they had entered the tent. Kenton continued to wait, still looking a little unsure of himself.

“Well?” Khriss prompted.

“Well what?” Kenton asked.

“Well, aren’t you going to mingle?”

Kenton sighed quietly. “I suppose I should.”

“Yes,” Khriss agreed. “That is what these events are for—even I know that, and I’m a socially reclusive scholar. Come on, you can begin by introducing me to people.”

And so, Kenton did as she instructed, moving through the crowd, using the opportunity to introduce Khriss as a method of introducing himself as well. The *kelzin* acted friendly toward him, smiling fake smiles and speaking fake words. In all, it was surprisingly like a court ball back in Elis. Replace the sunlight with Skycolors, the sand with marble floors, and the robes with suits and dresses, and the two would be indistinguishable.

However, the most surprising thing about the evening was how easily Khriss found herself playing the part of the room's central figure. Kenton had been right—between the two of them, they pretty much monopolized the entire party. As soon as they began talking to one set of *kelzin*, the others immediately assumed they were missing out on some opportunity, and sought to gain an audience as well. Khriss took their stares, goslings, and maneuverings in stride. She spoke easily, despite the language barrier. She laughed at jokes she didn't understand, flirted slightly with the men, and maintained an air of importance she had never managed back in Elis.

As the party progressed, she came to realize just how much the court's expectations had determined how she acted. In Elis, everyone had known her as Gevin's hermitile fiancée—a woman of some power, but little importance. Everyone thought of her as 'safe,' a woman who had been chosen because of her title, not her political savvy. She hadn't dared make too much of a scene, lest she steal the light from Gevin's sister-in-law, the future queen.

Here, however, she was an enigma. The *kelzin* were fascinated by the concept of innate nobility—status in society that could not be lost or made with fortunes. Apparently, most of Kezare ignored the darksiders and their little enclave—they hadn't even considered the possibility of foreign dignitaries living in their midst. By the time the party was half over, Khriss had received no fewer than six separate offers for international trading contracts to and from Elis. She had received them each with mysterious smiles, promising to give the offer consideration and leaving the merchant *kelzin* to wonder if they had offered too much or too little.

There was, of course, another big difference between this party and those back in Elis. In her homeland, she had always been accompanied by Gevin—a man so charismatic that it was impossible to compete with him. So, she hadn't tried. She had always simply been 'Gevalden's betrothed,' an almost forgotten adjunct to his royal highness.

It wasn't that Kenton wasn't charismatic when he wanted to be; he just wasn't as skilled. She had to take a guiding role with him, rather than a reclusive one. She gave suggestions on how to hold himself, what to say, and who to distrust. And he listened to her,

doing what she said without question. He handled himself impressively for one so new to political life.

She actually found that she was enjoying herself. Suddenly, she was more than just the prince's decoration. She was important, though no one could tell quite why. Still, she could see respect, and even envy, glowing in the eyes of the *kelzin.* Back home she might have only been only a passable politician, but here, where the equivalent of the noble class also had to spend a great deal of their time managing businesses, her life in the court gave her a strong advantage.

So it was that as the party began to near its end, Khriss found that she would regret having to go home—something that had never happened to her before.

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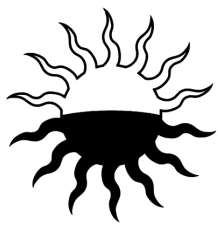

The arrival of the food signaled that the party was almost at its end. Now new business partners would gather a plate and a *qido* full of wine and make their way to a more secluded place, where they could celebrate their alliance and plot the downfall of their enemies.

"I had assumed there wouldn't be food," Khriss said with confusion as the servants began to slide in long tables full of breads, dips, and *ZaiDon*.

"Why would you assume that?" Kenton asked with confusion.

"Well, I thought the party was almost over," Khriss explained.

"It is," Kenton replied. "That's why they are bringing in the food."

Khriss frowned, but didn't comment further. Kenton could only assume that they did things differently on darkside.

The party had gone better than Kenton had expected. The *kelzin* didn't like him—that much he had predicted. However, despite their distaste, they had been civil and willing to talk to him. Some had even seemed eager for some reason. Little of what they discussed had been important, but Kenton had suffered it, mostly because of Khriss's constant encouragings. And, occasionally, he had been able to work something of substance into the conversation—implying that if the Diem were to continue, the sand masters

would bring prosperity to all of Lossand.

He wasn't certain if his talking would do any good—the *kelzin* were not Taisha. They had no vote on the Council, or any direct influence on the vote. However, they did hold a great deal of power in Lossand. If, perhaps, his words had swayed any of them, then there was a chance their support would help influence the Taisha. Regardless, one thing was certain—they looked at the Lord Mastrell in a completely new way.

They were used to old, mysterious men holed up in the Diem, rarely making appearances in town. Instead they had gotten Kenton. A boy not even two decades old with a vigorous temperament, a flair for originality, and a half-naked darkside woman on his arm. Kenton smiled to himself—this would not be a party they soon forgot.

"*ZaiDon*," Khriss said distastefully. "Is that all you people eat?"

"There's bread too," Kenton said with a chuckle, leading Khriss to one of the serving tables. Many of the *kelzin* had already filled their plates and were moving off toward the other pavilions, where cushions and tables would be set up for private dining.

"One of these days I'm going to have to introduce you to true cuisine," Khriss informed, looking over the table with a critical eye.

"You tried that already," Kenton reminded, selecting a carapace plate and grabbing a few klam patties, thin rectangular pieces of flat bread. "I thought it was 'squishy.' Remember?"

"You're hopeless," Khriss said with a sigh.

"I try my best. Here, taste this," he said, handing her a piece of *ZaiDon*.

She rolled her eyes, but let him put the piece of dried *ZaiDon* into her mouth. As soon as he did so, her eyes opened wide with surprise. "This is actually good!" she exclaimed.

"Of course," Kenton said, continuing to fill the plate with pieces of *ZaiDon*. "You didn't think it all tasted like travel rations, did you?"

Khriss didn't answer as Kenton handed her the plate, then moved to fill them a dipping bowl—a carapace dish with five different sections for different sauces.

"So, now what?" Khriss asked.

"Now we find a place to eat," Kenton informed. "Hopefully,

we'll be able to sneak away before anyone decides to join—"

"Kenton, my boy!" the Lord Admiral interrupted, approaching with a leisurely gait. "Surely you're not going to run off and eat by yourself?"

"Actually, we were planning to do just that," Kenton admitted, ignoring Khriss's 'what is he saying' look.

"Well then, good," Delious said. "I'll join you, and we can sneak off together. Don't look so downfallen—you're doing a public service. If you eat with me, then you're saving the rest of the people at the party from a similar fate. Someone has to suffer, you know."

"It would be an honor to dine with you, Lord Admiral. I still owe you my thanks for your pronouncement of support."

"Oh, how delightful. One party and they've already corrupted you. Come, I know the perfect place for us to dine." Delious stumbled drunkenly toward the exit to the tent; his steward followed with a plate of food. Kenton nodded with resignation to Khriss, and they did likewise.

Delious led them out into the sun and across his grounds, which appeared to be covered sand at least a few feet deep. The Lord Admiral had probably shipped sand in to cover his land—it was unfashionable to have too much rock showing on one's estate. Delious eventually chose a spot beneath an open-sided pavilion that overlooked several pens of exotic sandlings. He nodded for Kenton and Khriss to seat themselves on the cushions, then took a place himself, his steward sitting a short distance away. Kenton noticed that Ais, vigilant as always, had found himself a place not too far away—the trackt would probably be able to hear what they were saying.

"I fear I must apologize," Delious said, taking a long gulp from his cup. Despite his collapse near the beginning of the party, he now seemed no more intoxicated than when he had begun. Of course, 'no more intoxicated' still meant fairly drunk when it came to Delious. His speech was slurred, his movements exaggerated and clumsy, and his face burned with alcohol.

"Why apologize, My Lord?" Kenton asked after translating Delious's words for Khriss.

"I specifically asked you to bring this beauty of a darksider to meet me, then find myself with no opportunity to introduce myself.

It seems our Lady Khrissalla was so busy tonight that even her host was unable to get her attention."

Khriss blushed as Kenton translated. "The apology should be mine, Lord Delious," she said. "I should have made myself known to my host."

"No matter," Delious said with a wave of his hand. "I hope you enjoyed the party."

"It was a fine gathering, Your Lordship," Khriss replied.

"By dayside standards or darkside ones?" Delious asked, handing his cup to his steward. "I have often heard that darksiders are more refined than those of us over here."

"It was fine by my standards, Your Lordship," Khriss answered. "Which is all that matters to me."

"A good answer," Delious approved. "And you, Lord Mastrell? How did you find the accommodations?"

Kenton translated, shooting Khriss a look. She shrugged almost imperceptibly—she didn't know what to make of the Lord Admiral.

"It was agreeable," Kenton said slowly. "Though, I must admit that I wish the *kelzin* were more receptive to my message. There is only a week left before the vote—I don't have time for idle conversations."

Delious chuckled. "I doubt you will find the lords of my Profession very willing to hear what you have to say, I'm afraid."

"I know," Kenton said with a sigh. "I just wish I knew what they had against me. I suppose it is simply centuries of sand master arrogance working against me."

"True," Delious agreed, leaning back foppishly against his cushions. "Of course, it could be the A'Kar."

Kenton looked up. Delious was staring to the side, watching a large sandling with an ornate system of horns running from its head all the way down its back. His eyes were slightly unfocused from the alcohol. Surely there couldn't be much coherence left in his mind. Yet, while looking at the man's aged face, Kenton thought he saw something. A glimmer of wit that couldn't be completely dulled by wine.

"The A'Kar?" Kenton asked slowly, shooting Khriss another look. She was watching the Lord Admiral intently—she had noticed it too.

Delious shrugged with an exaggerated motion. “It is said that the A’Kar plans to slow trade between the Kershtian nation and Lossand—assuming he wins the Choosing in a few weeks, of course.”

“That only makes sense,” Kenton said. The statement was obvious—of course the High Priest of Kersha would slow trade. That was one of the fundamental issues that made him different from his opponent, the High Merchant.

“Of course,” Delious said, toying with his crystalline cup, “it is also said that the A’Kar is willing to forego his embargo if certain conditions are met.”

“Such as?” Kenton asked hesitantly.

“I don’t know,” Delious said. “I think the rumors are that he will only consider trade with Lossand if it renounces its unholy past.”

“You mean if it renounces the sand masters,” Kenton said, his eyes thinning in thought.

“You could say that,” Delious agreed. “In fact, I believe the rumors are that the A’Kar would even be willing to reward Lossand for getting rid of the sand masters.”

“Reward?” Kenton prompted.

“Oh, like the Kershtian taboo against using goods that have traveled over water.”

So that’s it! Kenton thought with surprise. For centuries, the Kershtians of the *kerla* had refused to accept goods from Lossand that had traveled by boat, forcing merchants to use more lengthy land routs. The taboo had completely locked the Helm’s *kelzin* out of a great deal of profit, since they depended on shipping for their livelihood. If the A’Kar declared the taboo changed, however…

“Sands!” Kenton swore softly. “It’s a wonder they haven’t had me assassinated themselves.”

“I’m surprised they haven’t tried,” Delious agreed.

“No wonder the *kelzin* hate me,” Kenton thought with wonder. “With so much riding on my defeat, I’m tempted to hate myself.”

“Don’t do that,” Delious chided. “It would be far too trendy.”

Kenton looked up again, studying the man’s face. He was a middle-aged drunken fool, but there appeared to be more to the Lord Admiral than he had once assumed. Some remnant of what he had once been, probably. Kenton could see hints of great wisdom in

Delious—wisdom that had, unfortunately, been nearly destroyed by the constant drinking.

"The *kelzin* must not have thought much of your declaration of support," Kenton said slowly.

"No, I don't imagine they did." Delious said, smiling broadly.

"Why did you do it, then?" Kenton asked hesitantly.

Delious shrugged. "Because," was his uninformative answer. "Tell me, Lord Mastrell. How much do you know about the Helm and its method of choosing its leader?"

"Not much," Kenton admitted. When one studied the Taisha, it was customary to leave out the Lord Admiral.

"It's probably best that way," Delious said with a smile, rising. "Well, I fear I must be going. I have many other people to bother before I'll be satisfied that this party was worth the time. Please, eat as much as you want. Oh, and do try to waste some wine for me."

Waste. He had emphasized the word. What did it mean?

"Kenton," Khriss said, watching the Lord Admiral stumble away, his steward following, "that man is more than just a drunken slob. Or, at least, he has the potential to be more."

The statement was based more on observation than on what the man had said. Kenton had grown very involved in the conversation, and his translations had grown abbreviated during the exchange. However, even with the limited information, Khriss had been able to tell that this drunkard held an interesting wit beneath his besotted exterior.

"I know," Kenton said musingly. "What do you suppose he is hiding?"

Khriss shook her head. "I have no idea. He really was drunk, though."

Kenton nodded. "He holds it well, however."

"Agreed."

Kenton shrugged, turning back to their meal.

Khriss hadn't been lying when she admitted the food was good—it appeared to be the same *ZaiDon* that they had eaten while travelling to Lossand, but its flavor was completely different—it had an almost buttery taste. The dips were good too—though one of them smelled strongly of the horrid *Ashawen* spice. She ignored that one, instead focusing on a sweet garlicky sauce.

Kenton ate in silence, his eyes thoughtful. Finally, Khriss decided to try broaching the topic she had been thinking about all night.

"So," she said conversationally, "how does this sand mastery of yours work, anyway."

The comment pulled him out of his contemplations, and he looked up with startlement. He recovered quickly, however, dipping his *ZaiDon* and shaking his head. "I can't tell you that," he said distractedly.

"Why not?" Khriss pried.

"It's forbidden," Kenton explained. "The secrets of sand mastery are for the Diem only."

"I thought you wanted to share sand mastery with all of Lossand," Khriss challenged.

"I do," Kenton replied. "But that doesn't mean I'm going to tell everyone how to make their own sand masters. A master craftsman shares his art with all who see it, but he doesn't necessarily reveal the secrets of its creation."

"But surely you can tell me," Khriss continued, giving him her sweetest smile. "You don't have to worry about me misusing them," *at least, not on this side of the world…*

Kenton shook his head. "Sorry, Khrissalla. Even in my rebellious days I wouldn't have done that. Some things are just too sacred."

This is going to be more difficult than I assumed, Khriss thought with annoyance. "Can't you tell me anything?"

Kenton's eyes thinned slightly. "Is this why you've been so nice to me today?" he asked. "Because you wanted to get this out of me?"

Oops. Went too far. "Of course not," Khriss huffed. "I'm just curious, like always."

"Well, I'm sorry, Khriss," he said, dipping his *ZaiDon*, "but this is one curiosity that will have to go unsated. You won't find a sand master willing to talk about such things with an outsider—the taboo runs as deep as our injunction against overmastery."

"Overmastery?" Khriss asked. "What's that?"

Kenton chuckled. "Sorry, Khriss, but I'm not going to tell you."

"Well, what if you made me a sand master?" Khriss asked. "If I joined, then could you teach me?"

“You couldn’t be a sand master,” Kenton explained. “Darksiders can’t join the Diem.”

“Why not?” demanded.

“Because.”

“For the same reason there aren’t any women sand masters?” Khriss asked. “Simply because ‘that is the way it has always been.’”

Kenton paused at this one, then he finally shook his head and continued to eat.

“Kenton, change is what brings progress. You yourself said that the Diem is having troubles because its lack of members. Well, maybe it is time to open your doors to women and darksiders.”

“Maybe sometime in the future,” Kenton agreed. “But I can’t afford to make a disturbance now. Tradition is what will see us through these times. That is one of the things I have learned recently. At a future date, when things are more stable, then maybe I will be able to look at entrance procedures and loosen them.”

“What are you so afraid of?” Khriss asked.

Kenton raised an eyebrow, then reached over to the sand beside their mat and picked up a handful of sand. Khriss watched closely as he took control of it. It didn’t make sense—it seemed that all he had to do was touch it and it started to glow. Where did the power come from? What kept the sand in a perpetual state of energy release?

The sand extended from his hand in what looked like a thin ribbon, perhaps a couple of inches across. In his other hand, he picked up their now-empty carapace plate.

“Do you have any idea how powerful sand mastery is, Khriss?” he asked.

Suddenly his sand whipped forward and, with barely a sound, sliced through he plate along its diameter. Half of the plate fell to the mat, cut precisely in half as if by a powerful razor.

“Sand mastery is the most dangerous tool on the continent,” Kenton explained, moving his sand out over the ground, then letting it fall black. “Can you imagine the horrors it could produce? Armies with sand masters attacking one another, slaughtering thousands upon thousands of people? This is why we keep the secrets of sand mastery to ourselves. If the method of our creation were known, then dayside would be thrown into chaos.”

Khriss could imagine armies with sand masters, armies killing one another. However, in her mind it was the army of Elis, defending itself against invaders. Even a tiny country could survive against the Dynasty if it had such an awesome weapon.

"And you get to decide?" Khriss asked. "You are the gods who determine who benefits from sand mastery and who does not?"

"Better us than no one," Kenton replied. "The Diem is flawed, but even a flawed system is preferable to complete anarchy."

"I disagree," Khriss returned. "People should be able to determine for themselves how to use sand mastery.

"Disagree all you want," Kenton said with a smile. "I'm still not going to tell you how it works."

Khriss sat and fumed, mostly because of her helplessness. No matter what she said or did, he still held all of the information. She didn't have anything with which to bargain.

Kenton rose, the meal apparently over, and helped her to her feet. Ais saw them leaving and moved to join them, following behind with an unreadable expression. After collecting Baon from the servant's tent, they simply made their way back to the front of the building. Apparently the arrival of the meal was an understood dismissal by the Lord Admiral, and they weren't required to bid him farewell.

As they were leaving, however, Khriss saw a familiar form. "Is that Nilto?" she asked, nodding toward a hunched figure speaking animatedly with a few seated *kelzin*.

"Yes." Surprisingly, it was Ais who answered her.

"You know him?" Kenton asked with surprise.

"We have met," Khriss said simply. "Why wasn't he at the party?"

"Maybe he arrived late," Kenton said with a shrug.

"No," Ais said from behind. "I saw him at the beginning. He slipped out just after we arrived."

Khriss frowned. "Why would he do that?"

"He probably hates sand masters," Kenton said. "The sentiment is fairly prevalent amongst the people he represents."

"Maybe," Khriss agreed.

"Shall we go greet him?" Kenton asked.

"No," Khriss said with a flat voice. "Let's go."

The carriage waited where Kenton had left it, and the four climbed in for their return trip. Kenton rode quietly, feeling guilty for some reason.

You don't have to answer her questions, he told himself. *You're in the right—sand mastery must retain its secrets for the good of dayside.* Such was what he had always been taught.

However, his problem wasn't as much with the arguments against him as it was with his desire to tell Khriss what she wanted to know. For some reason, he had stopped being annoyed by her curiosity—it was just part of who she was. He wanted to answer her questions. This time, however, he could not. It was frustrating.

So bothered by the subject that he didn't notice the voices until Khriss pointed them out to him.

"What is happening over there?" she asked with concern.

Kenton looked up immediately, hearing the yelling. Baon was already half-crouched, his hand on the butt of one of his pistols. However, the sounds didn't sound like a battle—more screams for help.

Frowning, Kenton stood, reaching into his sand pouch. "Wait here," he ordered, leaping out of the carriage.

He raced down the street, following the sound. They had left the *kelzi* district of Kezare and were nearing the more busy section of the city. People stood looking toward the sounds with confusion on their faces. Kenton pushed by them, making his way down a side street until he approached the source of the disturbance.

A wreck of a building stood before him. Workers stood anxiously around the collapsed structure, many of their faces bruised and cut. From what Kenton could tell, the building had fallen as they tried to add the second story. One of the walls, a massive construction of blocks and mortar, had fallen inward.

"What is going on here?" he demanded.

One of the workers, a foreman of some sort, noticed him for the first time. The man cried out in surprise, pulling off his brimmed worker's hat and holding it before him nervously.

"I… I'm sorry, My Lord!" he apologized. "We didn't mean to disturb you!"

"Nonsense. What happened?"

"Nothing to concern yourself with, My Lord," the man promised,

his eyes horrified. Kenton ignored him, studying the other workers. Most of them stood facing him, their eyes cast down at the ground. A couple of them weren't looking at him, however. They continued to work, their faces desperate as they pushed against a steel rod, using it to vainly try and lift part of the collapsed wall.

As Kenton looked closely, he could hear a couple of pitiful voices calling from below the wreck, in what must have been a basement chamber. The stone wall was barely holding together, its mortar cracking even as the workers continued their futile effort to lift it. The enormous blocks were beginning to break free from one another.

"There are men down there?" Kenton asked with alarm.

"Please, My Lord," the foreman wailed. "Don't punish them. It wasn't their fault, it was mine. We didn't mean to bother you."

Kenton frowned. He shouldn't do anything—it would break horribly with tradition. Sand masters didn't use their powers in public.

Sand masters were fools. Kenton pushed the foreman aside and reached for his sand. The foreman collapsed to his knees in fear. "Oh Sands, oh sands…"

The three workers at the bar—which was now bent horribly—cried out in surprise as Kenton gathered his sand. Three ribbons whipped toward them, and they cringed in fright, then looked up with surprise as the sand didn't attack them, but instead moved in-between the fallen wall and the lip of rocky ground.

Kenton held his hands before him, his fist clinched, his eyes closed, and then began to push.

A sand master's ability to lift depended on the height he wanted to obtain. Ribbons could only handle so much stress, and they buckled if one didn't have enough sand to create a proper foundation. Even the weaker sand masters, the ones who could only control a single ribbon, could usually lift themselves a few inches into the air. It was height that required strength.

This day, Kenton didn't need height. He strained his power, pushing against the stone wall, the muscles in his body growing tense, as if he were working with his entire body and not just his sand. And, with a groan that mimicked the one that escaped Kenton's lips, the wall began to rise.

He could only lift it a few feet, but it was enough. He cracked his eyes, holding the massive weight with difficulty, as three grungy workers scrambled from the dark basement room. Helping hands pulled them to freedom. A second later, Kenton's strength ran out, and he dropped the wall with a sigh. It crashed back to the ground, its mortar shattering immediately, dropping a half dozen massive blocks into the basement.

Kenton felt drained—he nearly collapsed from fatigue as he reached out to a nearby wall for support. He waited a few moments, trying to rally his strength. His body immediately began to sweat now that the drain on its water had been removed. Kenton slumped back against the wall with a sigh, pulling out his *qido* and taking a huge gulp—one he nearly choked on, he was breathing so deeply.

Finally he opened his eyes, looking at the amazed foreman who was still kneeling on the ground before him. "What is your name, man?" Kenton whispered.

"Trell, sir."

"All right, Trell," Kenton said. "Next time you have a problem like this, send for a sand master immediately. Understand?"

"Yes, My Lord," the man said, confusion in his eyes.

"Good," Kenton said, turning back toward the street. Khriss stood in front of him, her strange shoes held in her hands, the massive Baon behind her.

"I thought I told you to stay put," Kenton said with a slight smile.

"And why would I listen to you?" Khriss shot back.

"Because it might have been a trap of some sort, meant to kill me."

"They can't attack you today," Khriss reminded.

"Assumedly," Kenton agreed, shooting Ais a look. The trackt was regarding the devastation with a quiet expression.

"That was very noble of you," Khriss said as they began to walk back toward the carriage.

Kenton shrugged. "Its what we should have been doing all along."

"It's too bad the rest of the world can't benefit from such abilities," she noted.

Kenton shot her a suffering look. Then, slowly, he shook his

head and began to laugh to himself. She was just as good at arguing as he was, she just had a more subtle way of doing it.

Behind him, Kenton heard the foreman call to his men. “All right, boys,” he said. “Let’s start picking up this rubble.”

Kenton turned. “Trell, don’t you think your men deserve the rest of the day off?” he asked.

The foreman turned with surprise. “But, *Kelzi* Kar—”

“Send your men home,” Kenton ordered. “If the good *kelzi* has a problem, tell him he can bring it up with the Lord Mastrell.”

“Um, yes, My Lord,” the man said.

Kenton nodded and made his way back to the carriage.

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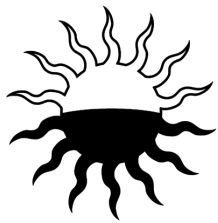

"So, it's impossible?" Baon asked with dissatisfaction.

"I'm afraid so," Khriss replied, shaking her head. They sat in her room, and on the table before her sat the results of Baon's searchings—a small pile of yellow powder and a slightly larger black one.

Baon sat on her bed, frowning slightly, his pistols on his lap. He was methodically cleaning the barrels and oiling the mechanisms.

"It's a fact, Baon," Khriss explained. "You need saltpeter to make gunpowder." Baon and N'Teese had spent most of the day scouring the city for the materials to make gunpowder. Khriss was surprised they had even found sulfur—apparently there was a small deposit of it in the eastern mountains. Unfortunately, sandling manure wasn't the same as that from darkside creatures, and so saltpeter was much more rare.

"I could probably make some saltpeter it if we had the time," Khriss decided. "But I intend to head back to darkside as soon as I know the secret to sand mastery. How many charges do you have left?"

"Six," Baon said.

Khriss nodded. It wasn't much. But, six charges should be enough to get them home—assuming she could get Kenton to open up.

She had been working on that single problem for most of the day. Ever since her failure at the party a day before, she had been trying to devise a way to get past Kenton's taboos. She had thought of trying to ask one of the other sand masters, but the language barrier was a problem. Besides, if Kenton, who was one of the more open-minded sand masters, wouldn't answer her, then why would another sand master do so, especially through a translator?

The only option left to her was observation. She was used to that—she had spent years training in the Elisian university, doing experiments, making observations, and applying modern scientific techniques. However, watching Kenton also meant going to the Diem—which could be dangerous, considering the assassinations. Baon had discouraged her from going immediately, suggesting they try to find another source of gunpowder first.

That, however, didn't look possible. They hadn't been able to find a proper source of manurial soil, and the dayside apothecaries were fairly primitive. The Kershtian medicinal shops had been more useful—containing numerous powders and a surprising number of acids and other chemical items. Unfortunately, saltpeter didn't appear to be something widely used on this side of the world.

Khriss turned away from the piles of powder, instead looking at a small jar of clear liquid. She had purchased some of it more out of curiosity than for practical use.

"You're just going to have to get very good with a *zinkall*, Baon," she suggested, reaching over to drop a piece of carapace into the jar. The carapace bubbled for a moment, like hydrogen peroxide poured on a wound, then fell still. She reached her forceps in, pulling out the carapace piece, then dropped it into a jar of water. It sank to the bottom, but did not dissolve.

"It creates some sort of patina," Khriss said curiously. "The outer layer of carapace reacts with the liquid, transforming it into something that is insoluble in water."

"A useful process," Baon said, beginning to reassemble his pistol.

Khriss turned to watch him work, his fingers moving with familiarity as he worked. The pistols were beautiful constructions, their barrels clean and polished, their handles inlayed with silver plates that were intricately carved. Carved in the shape of the Elisian royal seal. And, of course, the two-barrel design was usually

reserved for officers and the rich, a sort of prestige symbol…

Khriss paused, frowning slightly. “Baon, where did you get those pistols?” she asked.

Baon snapped the final piece into place. He didn’t look up. “I… acquired them,” he said.

Immediately, an alarm went off in Khriss’s mind. Baon never avoided questions. “Baon,” she said, suddenly feeling a little afraid, “those are Elisian officer’s pistols. Where did you get them?”

Baon looked up calmly. “I don’t think you want to know.”

“Officer’s pistols…” Khriss continued slowly. “Pistols like Captain Deral and his lieutenant would have carried… The two men who were killed that night, when you were off scouting…”

Baon closed his eyes, lowering his head slightly.

“Baon,” Khriss said, somehow managing to keep her voice steady, “did you kill Captain Deral?”

“Yes.”

Khriss felt cold, horribly cold. “Were you sent to Elis by the Dynasty?”

“Yes.”

Khriss sat stunned.

She didn’t know what to do. It was impossible—Baon was too good, too loyal, to be a spy. However, a part of her warned that a spy would be no good unless he were convincing… Capable of gaining the trust of those he was to infiltrate… those he was to kill.

“Oh, Shella,” she whispered. “They sent you to kill Gevin, if we found him.”

Baon didn’t respond. Instead Khriss heard the sound of something snapping against the floor. She looked up to see Acron and Cynder standing in the doorway, their eyes wide with shock. Cynder’s hand lay open, a jar of white powder having dropped free from its grasp. They had found some saltpeter after all.

Baon stood. “That’s it, then,” he said, nodding once in her direction. “Good day, duchess.” With that, he pushed his way through the pair of stunned professors and out the door. Khriss watched in amazement, not certain how to react. She could hear his feet clump against the floor as he strode through the hallway and down the stairs. The front door opened and closed a moment later.

Khriss remained quiet for a moment, then she groaned and laid

her head against her table.

Kenton spent the day fretfully, wondering when the attack would come. Ais had brought additional guards this day, commandeering some of those who were members of his own band. These men sat stationed all around the Diem, watching for assassins—Ais's second in command stood on Kenton's balcony, watching what happened in the courtyard with a keen eye.

Kenton wanted to be free of their watchings, but knew that such would be foolish. Ais might be a spy, but he had also done a decent job of defending Kenton—no matter what the man's own personal biases were, he was an extraordinary trackt.

Ais himself sat at the table in the main room of Kenton's quarters, reading over a stack of papers. Kenton had spent most of the day in his father's study, just within view of Ais's careful eye, reading books from the former Lord Mastrell's shelf. It was frustrating, and he felt trapped, but he didn't know what else to do. He didn't have any business outside the Diem—he had visited all of the Taishin that he could. Visiting the Lord Farmer would be pointless, and the Lord Mason still hadn't chosen his emissary.

So, Kenton just waited. Fortunately, his father did have some interesting books on the shelf—including a full eight volume set of the Law. Intrigued by his meeting with the Lord Admiral, Kenton had begun reading the Helm's Charter, especially the part that dealt with the choosing of a new Lord Admiral. He had been stunned by what he found.

Like the Lord Mastrell, the Lord Admiral was elected by a small percentage of the Profession's members. A group known as the Shipowner's Circle were the ones who voted—they were a formal collection of *kelzin* who owned the largest fleets in the Helm, some of them controlling as many as ten ships. Unlike the Lord Mastrell—or most of the other Taishin—the Lord Admiral was not chosen for life. The Shipowner's Circle could choose a new Lord Admiral whenever it wanted—though they rarely did so.

The differences only grew more stark. While other Taisha were the heads of their Professions, the title of Lord Admiral conveyed almost no power. He was given a vote on the Taishin Council, but no authority over anyone in the Helm. The true governing power was reserved for the Shipowner's Circle.

In addition, a man could not refuse to be Lord Admiral. Whomever the Circle declared was Lord Admiral—assuming he was a member of the Helm—had to fulfill the position until they chose someone else. The Lord Admiral was required by Law to forfeit all of his possessions to the Helm—his ships, his land, and any wealth he might have accumulated. The language of the Charter said that he was 'to serve only his Profession,' and was thereby denied material possessions. However, to any rational eye the appointment looked like more of a punishment than an honor.

Kenton read over the paragraphs with a stunned expression. Suddenly Lord Delious's gaudy display of wealth made sense. It wasn't arrogance or greed, it was an attempt to get back at the Circle. By law, could only demand two things from them—a home and food. By law, the Lord Admiral was cared for by the Shipowner's Circle. It was supposedly a simple task, since all the Lord Admiral was allowed to demand was 'enough food and drink to sate his wants, and a roof over his head, as per his desires.' Delious's house must have cost thousands of lak.

And, of course, Delious's constant drunkenness made a little more sense as well—if Kenton had been forced into a position where he had no power, no possessions, and was considered a joke by the rest of his Profession, he would probably become an alcoholic as well.

Poor man, Kenton thought with a shake of his head. *Forever trapped in a meaningless life. To someone of few desires, it would be paradise. But to a man who had been motivated, who enjoyed what he did, it would as bad as imprisonment.*

Kenton heard a door open, and he jumped, reaching for a handful of sand. Ais dropped to the floor, his *zinkall* raised to fire.

"Sands!" Eric's voice snapped. "A bit jumpy today, aren't you people?"

Ais ignored him, sighing as he sat back on his chair.

"When assassins want you dead, Eric, you tend to be 'a little jumpy," Kenton pointed out as Eric appeared in the doorway to his study.

Eric shrugged, smiling slightly. "You're just going to kill yourself in six days, remember?"

Kenton paused. "Yes, well, I have to last those six days. Besides,

as I constantly have to remind you, there's a chance I'll survive the fight with Drile."

"Keep telling yourself that," Eric said, looking for a place to sit. There was still a broad smile on his face.

"Thank you for the outpouring of optimism," Kenton replied, closing the book.

"Find anything?" Eric asked, eventually deciding to just lean against the wall.

"I learned a lot of things," Kenton replied, rubbing his eyes. "Unfortunately, none of it has any relevance to my problems whatsoever. And why on the sands are you smiling like that?"

"Because I'm brilliant," Eric explained.

Kenton raised an eyebrow.

"I've solved one of your problems for you."

"Which one? My desperate need to be annoyed?"

Eric huffed. "You will regret that remark, oh sarcastic one. Come on."

Eric nodded toward the main room, walking out and not waiting to see if Kenton followed. With a sigh, Kenton did so, following Eric to the balcony. Ais's second stepped aside as Kenton moved out onto the carapace structure.

"What?" he asked.

Eric pointed down at a group of sand masters. "What do you see?"

"Sand masters?" Kenton asked.

"Which sand masters?"

Kenton frowned slightly, identifying the subjects. Dirin's bright red hair made him stand out as he stood at the front of the group, reading something off of a ledger.

Kenton shrugged. "Dirin, Treeden, Doril—"

"Right," Eric interrupted. "Dirin. What do you notice about him?"

"Look, Eric," Kenton said sufferingly. "I appreciate your brilliance, I really do. But could we get on with this?"

"His hair, Kenton," Eric whispered. "What color is it?"

"Red," Kenton said.

"And who has red hair?"

Kenton paused. "Talloners," he replied.

“Exactly,” Eric said with a smile. “The Lord Mason hates to deal with regular Lossandin politics, so he always sends an emissary to cast his vote on the Council. The only requirement is that the emissary be of Talloner blood.”

Kenton looked down at Dirin again, frowning contemplatively. “It wouldn’t work, Eric,” he said. “The Lord Mason would never choose Dirin as his emissary.”

“Why not?” Eric defended. “From what I’ve heard, most Talloners are like their lord—they dislike leaving their city in the shadows. If someone arrived that actually desired the position, I’ll bet that the Lord Mason would give it to him.”

“It’s too far away,” Kenton protested.

“Two days by boat and two days back. Look, why are we arguing about this? Do you want to win this vote or not?”

Kenton ground his teeth. “I don’t like it—there’s too little chance that it will work.”

Eric snorted. “And the rest of your schemes are so likely to succeed?”

“Good point,” Kenton agreed. “All right, we’ll try it.” He summoned a ribbon, sending it down into the courtyard to tap Dirin on the shoulder. The boy looked up and nodded, bidding farewell to the other sand masters and hurrying toward one of the now-finished staircases.

Ais divided his attention between the Lord Mastrell and his reports. When he had learned that Kenton intended to spend most of the day in fortified seclusion, Ais had sent one of his men back to the Hall for his stacks of papers. If he was going to spend the day sitting around, he might as well get something done.

It was difficult for Ais to continue focus all of his time on the Lord Mastrell. His senses as a trackt, developed over nearly two decades of investigation, told him he was close to proving Sharezan and Nilto were the same person. He had been chasing Sharezan for five years, and now he was finally in a position where he could topple the man.

Word on the street was that there was dissention in Sharezan’s ranks. On of his main allies—the rumors left out his name—wanted to split with the organization. If Ais could capture the malcontent, or even contact him, then he might be willing to betray Nilto in

exchange for immunity.

And so Ais had set his men—those who weren't guarding the Diem—to the task. They were on the streets of Kezare, speaking with their contacts, letting it be known that Ais was willing to make a deal.

Ais continued to read as the red-haired sand master boy entered the room, and Kenton explained his plans. The boy, of course, was completely terrified by the responsibility.

"I… I couldn't do that, sir," Dirin protested.

"Sure you could, Dirin," Kenton cajoled. "All you have to do is ask. If you fail, then it's all right. You'll have tried your best."

"But, what if I fail?" the boy whispered. "The Diem would fall because of me!"

"No, it won't," Kenton assured. "This is my plan, remember. If the Diem falls, it will only be one man's responsibility."

"Sir, I… it's too important a job for me," Dirin insisted weakly.

Kenton frowned to himself. He wouldn't have thought that it would be this difficult—Dirin had far too low of an opinion of himself. "Dirin, I won't order you," Kenton began, "but I will ask. Will you travel to Nor'Tallon and ask the Lord Mason to appoint you as his emissary?"

Dirin looked sick. "Yes, I will, sir."

"Good boy," Kenton said, slapping him on the shoulder.

"How will I pay for it?" Dirin wondered. "You can't commandeer ships, can you sir?"

"No," Kenton said with a frown.

"How much money is left from our little ransack?" Eric asked.

"Not much," Kenton said. "How much would it cost to charter a ship?"

"I have no idea," Eric confessed.

Kenton turned toward Ais, who was obviously trying to ignore the conversation and focus on his reading. However, Kenton knew from experience that Ais would be listening—the tract had to pay attention to make a good spy. "Ais, do you know?"

Ais looked up with a silent sigh. "An entire ship? It would be expensive, *Ry'Kensha*. Probably a couple of thousand lak."

"All right, Dirin," Kenton said. "See what you can find, and take what you need from our stores."

“Sir, we only have a couple of thousand left…”

“Use what you need,” Kenton reiterated.

“Yes, sir,” Dirin said, walking toward the door. However, before he could leave, the boy had one last question. “Um, sir?” he asked.

Kenton turned around. “Yes?”

“Did you really do it, sir?” Dirin asked eagerly.

“Do what, Dirin?”

“Save those men yesterday?” Dirin explained. “They say you dug through twenty feet of rock, lifting nearly an entire building, to save some trapped workers.”

Kenton smiled. “It’s an exaggeration, but it’s essentially true. Where did you hear about it?”

“It’s all over the city, sir,” Dirin said. “Everyone is talking about you. They heard about what you’re going to do—with Drile, I mean. How you’re going to… Anyway, there are lots of rumors. No one can believe that a sand master would rescue people like that, let alone sacrifice himself…”

“You’re a celebrity,” Eric noted.

Kenton snorted. “For now. If I actually manage to save the Diem they’ll all go back to hating us.” Then he nodded toward the boy. “Thank you, Dirin. The news is heartening. Now hurry up—you have less than six days to get to Nor Tallon and back.”

“Yes, sir,” Dirin said energetically, rushing from the room.

Kenton and Eric went back to their talking in the other room, and Ais was finally given a chance to return to his reading. Unfortunately, something else started to distract him. His own mind.

He had been pondering a subject lately. If a man died nobly for an evil cause, what was that man? A misguided hero? A sinner of the worst kind because he tried to make that which was evil seem good? Ais was lost for an answer. Kenton’s actions the day proved that he himself was not an evil man.

Of course, Ais had never believed that all sand masters were evil by nature—they simply made evil choices, and it was by ones choices that one would be judged. Good or not, Kenton and his sand mastery still needed to be exterminated from the sands, lest their evil continue to corrupt others.

Still, Ais was impressed with this Lord Mastrell. Kenton was an

earnest man, trying his best to accomplish an impossible task. Such was basis for nobility, if only his efforts had been applied to a noble cause.

But, Ais believed—contrary to many Kershtian teachings—that the Sand Lord had mercy in his heart even for sand masters. It was a basis of *Ker'reen* philosophy that the world was made up of opposites, and God was He in whom opposites could coexist without destroying one another. He was darkness and light, for He had created both. He was good and evil, cold and heat, love and hatred. He could condemn the sand masters, yet have mercy for them at the same time. The doctrine of Coexistent Contradiction was a major part of the Kershtian belief system.

Perhaps Kenton would find forgiveness once he died. Until that time, however, Ais was required to hate him. It was a pity, really, but he didn't have a choice.

Khriss took the betrayal quietly. She had to remain strong—she had let herself go when she found out about Gevin, and that was wrong. Of course, Baon had been the one to teach her that…

"We need to find him," Khriss said softly, sitting on her bed, hands in her lap. "He deserves a chance to explain himself. Perhaps there is more to this that we don't know." Of course, she had no idea where to find him. She had sent N'Teese to find Nilto, so that she could ask the beggar to look for Baon, but she didn't have much hope. Baon was too skillful to be captured.

"My Lady…" Cynder said sitting awkwardly on the chair beside her scientific table. He rested his hand on her shoulder, obviously uncertain what to do. "My Lady," he repeated, "Baon was very good at what he did. Too good. I had often wondered how a simple mercenary became such a learned, even crafty, man."

"I never trusted him," Acron announced. He sat on her table, munching on a bag of some candied confections he had purchased in the Kezare marketplace. The legs to the table were bowing, as if seriously considering a collapse. "You know, he was the one who drove Flennid and the other soldiers away. He probably planned that, so we would be left only to his mercies. Everyone knows how well-trained Scythe's assassins are."

"Acron is right," Cynder agreed. "Dynastic spies are a very elite group. There is no shame in having fallen for Baon's lies, My Lady.

Scythe employs only the most crafty, careful men. Prince Gevalden himself was killed by one."

Khriss nodded slowly, still staring down at her hands. She felt helpless and stupid. How had she not seen it earlier? Cynder was right—a simple mercenary would never have known the things Baon did. He was too shrewd, too skilled… too perfect. He had only made one mistake—the guns. He must not have been able to resist taking them, once he killed the two senior officers. The guns were masterfully made, and he would have realized their usefulness.

"I'm just wondering how Captain Deral found out what he was," Acron said conversationally. "I mean, how did the Captain see it when I didn't?"

Cynder rolled his eyes.

Khriss took a deep breath. "All right, it is time to move on. Baon left, but the expedition still has a purpose it needs to fulfill."

"My Lady?" Cynder asked.

"I'm going to the Diem," she informed, standing. "If Kenton isn't going to tell me how sand mastery works, then I'll just have to watch and learn for myself."

"But, duchess, it is too dangerous," Cynder warned. "The assassins…"

"They care nothing for me," Khriss said. "They want Kenton."

"Still, My Lady," Cynder said speculatively. "Perhaps you could wait…"

"Until when?" Khriss demanded. "Until Kenton is dead?" Khriss shook her head. "No, Cynder. I have to do this now. We know the prince is dead, now we need to gather what information we can and return to Elis. Every day I waste is another day Elis goes without sand mastery to protect it."

"My Lady," Acron said, standing as she walked toward the door. "At least let one of us accompany you. Now that you don't have a bodyguard, you may need our protection."

Khriss turned back to the two professors, one overweight, the other elderly. Neither would be of much use for protection. Both, however, stood with determined, honorable looks on their face. Their skill might be questionable, but their loyalty was not. They would do what they could to defend their duchess.

"All right," she said. "You may become my bodyguards. Cynder,

look over there in my trunk."

The linguist did as ordered, moving to open the trunk. He reached inside, and pulled out a shiny silver pistol.

"What?" he asked with surprise.

"Prince Gevalden's," she explained. "I think he would approve of its use in this case."

"Certainly, My Lady," Cynder agreed.

"But, the scoundrel took all the charges!" Acron complained.

Khriss smiled, tapping the almost-forgotten jar of saltpeter on the floor. "That's all right."

A harsh lisping voice sounded from just beside Khriss. She jumped with surprise.

"You wanted to speak with me?" N'Teese translated.

Khriss stopped in the middle of the crowded street. She hadn't even seen Nilto approach. Of course, the man, with his dayside cloak and nondescript manner, blended well with the people flowing around them. She turned to regard him, and was once again struck by his horrible ugliness. His face was disfigured, like it had been smashed when he was a child, and his flesh ribbed and twisted. She stared at him for a moment, Nilto meeting her eyes, then she blushed. He must be used to people staring.

Nilto began to move toward the side of the street where they could speak more privately, and Khriss followed, moving through he crowd with difficulty now that Baon wasn't there to clear a path for her. She and Acron had been on their way to purchase more gunpowder ingredients—her investigation of the Diem would have to wait for tomorrow. It was an acceptable delay considering what they would gain by her spending a few more hours in her impromptu laboratory.

Acron followed her through the crowd, shooting suspicious looks at the Lord Beggar. Nilto returned the looks with rolls of his eyes.

"What do you wish of me, woman?" Nilto rasped through N'Teese as Khriss arrived.

"A… friend of mine has disappeared," Khriss explained. "I would like you to find him, if you could."

The Lord Beggar snorted. "You waste my time," he informed, a drip of spittle running down the side of his cheek.

"I could pay," Khriss explained.

“Woman, do you have any idea what my time is worth?” he asked sharply. “Do you have any idea how many people I have to care for? How busy my days are? You think I have time to search for a runaway servant?” He began to stumble away.

“Please, Lord Nilto,” she said after him. “At least watch for him. If any of your people mention a large, shaven-headed darksider, tell me. You need not expend effort, just…”

Nilto turned slowly. “He’s important to you,” he mumbled. “A lover?”

Khriss blushed, shaking her head. “Like I said. A friend.”

The Lord Beggar turned back toward the moving crowd. “Keep your offered money handy, miss darksider. If I hear anything, I’ll expect a reward.”

The attack never came. Kenton waited and waited, growing more tense with each passing minute. Ais changed his trackts in shifts, keeping them alert and watchful. The assassins, however, decided not to make a showing that day.

“Maybe they finally ran out of people,” Elorin offered. He had joined the vigil, keeping Kenton company after Eric wandered off to get some sleep. As the hours progressed, Kenton was having increasing difficulty staying awake. The drain of the last few weeks was horrible—if the assassins or Drile didn’t kill him, the fatigue probably would.

“Maybe,” he said in response to the kindly old sand master’s encouragement.

“You should get some sleep, Lord Mastrell,” Elorin suggested.

Kenton nodded absently, his mind drifting. His major problem was still Vey. The Lord Merchant effectively held two votes on the Council, and he was Kenton’s strongest opposition. Somehow, as impossible as it seemed, Kenton had to get the Lord Merchant to join with him. Unfortunately, the only thing he could think of was bribery. The Lord Merchant’s vote was probably for sale, no matter what he said—it’s just that Kenton doubted he could afford his price.

The most confusing thing about it all was the tribute. Tributes weren’t even written into the law—they had been donated by the other Professions in gratitude for the sand masters’s protection. The system was antiquated, however, and it made sense that the other

Professions would have stopped it—especially since the sand masters could just demand what they needed from local merchants.

But why had the Guild continued to pay all these years? It didn't make sense. Vey hated the sand masters, yet his Profession continued to donate money to the Diem every quarter.

Kenton rose from his seat, stretching. Elorin sat dozing on one of the room's chairs. "I think I'll take your advice, Elorin," he said. It was probably well past twelfth-hour. He would be safe for another day. According to Ais, if the assassins missed the day of their attack, they had to wait another one before they could try again.

Elorin sand master nodded his bald head, rising and walking toward the door. As he opened it, however, he frowned.

"Lord Mastrell?" he asked.

Kenton turned. "Yes?"

Elorin pointed to a note attached to the wooden door. Kenton frowned, approaching to pull the note off. It was folded in the same way the one a few days had been, the one that Ais had claimed was to him.

Kenton flipped it open, reading the short message. *I warned you* was all that it said.

Kenton frowned, reading the message. Then he shrugged, handing the note to Ais's second, who was still standing watch on the balcony.

"See that Ais gets this," he requested. The senior trackt had gone out to check on the watches. "I assume it will make more sense to him than it does to me."

The second looked at the note with confused eyes, then nodded to Kenton, walking out the balcony and calling softly for another trackt to approach and receive the note.

Kenton wandered into his room and collapsed onto his sand mattress.

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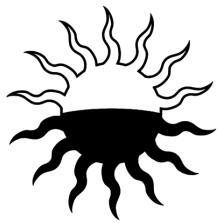

Kenton was standing in the place where he would die.

Might die, he reminded himself.

He stood in the Pit's direct center, where a forty-foot circle of sand formed the field in which he would fight Drile. The broad opening in the ceiling let in a column of sunlight which fell directly on the circle of sand, both to provide light and recharge any sand turned black by sand mastery. Or by blood.

The stadium-like benches rose around him, sand-colored, like the rest of the Diem. They were empty now, though Kenton could almost imagine the dead mastrells sitting around, staring down at him, their eyes judgmental. *You were made Lord Mastrell little over a week ago, and already you have brought back our most abhorrent process.*

Sand masters hadn't killed one another in over a century. What was he saying to the sand masters, letting the reign of their next Lord Mastrell—whomever it might be—start with the slaughter of his opponent? Khriss had called dayside primitive; perhaps she was right.

Of course, whoever won might not even become Lord Mastrell. Kenton's chances of saving the Diem were looking increasingly dim. *You will be the Lord Mastrell remembered for destroying his own Profession*, the unseen sand masters seemed to accuse. *You claimed*

to want this all your life, but when you get it you immediately lose it.

Kenton looked up at the benches, though it was hard to see them the way the room was lighted, with sunlight falling directly on the center pit. He stepped forward, leaving the warm sunlight, stepping out onto one of the stone benches.

Soon these benches would be full, packed with people come to watch an execution. Now that the news had spread through the city, Kenton had already begun to receive requests from the *kelzin*. Everyone wanted to be in attendance—it was becoming the social event of the century. Never mind that just a few days ago they had all shunned the Diem as unhallowed ground. Now they each expected favoritism, especially those Kenton had spoken with at the Lord Admiral's party.

Kenton shook his head in disdain. None of them would come to a Lord Mastrell's confirmation, but everyone wanted to see one's execution. And that was what it would be, an execution. For all his positive thinking, Drile was going to massacre him.

"Contemplating your immanent meeting with the Sand Lord, Lord Mastrell?" an amused voice asked.

Kenton looked up toward the sound to find Drile standing in the Pit's doorway. Kenton turned away, not bothering to respond to the baiting. Surprisingly, perhaps for the first time in his life, Kenton didn't feel like arguing.

"You know," Drile said, walking down the stone benches like steps, "the ironic thing is, your sacrifice probably won't mean anything. Five more days will pass, and you still won't have the support you need. You realize I'm not going to let you back out of your challenge, even if the Taisha are going to vote against you?"

Kenton looked up, meeting Drile's eyes. "I wouldn't expect you to."

Drile just smiled. "And, even if you do find enough support, do you think the Taisha will hold to their promises once I've killed you? They'll change their minds and dissolve us anyway. Then I'll take the sand masters to the Rim Kingdoms. Be happy, however—you'll get your revenge eventually. We'll probably return at the head of Rim armies to destroy Lossand."

He was so arrogant, so uncaring of life. Suddenly, Kenton found

himself wanting to do anything he could to tear that smile away from Drile. Kenton's optimism returned, fueled by determination. *You should know better, Drile. The surest way to encourage me is to taunt me.*

Kenton raised his lips in a very slight smile. "I suppose you're right, Drile."

Drile frowned. That wasn't the reaction he had been expecting. "You're a fool if you aren't afraid," he warned.

Kenton shrugged. "I definitely should be. It looks hopeless, doesn't it?." He smiled to himself knowingly.

Drile snorted. "You are a fool."

"Sure am."

Drile started to look nervous. Kenton could almost see the question in his eyes. *What do you know that I don't, Kenton?*

Finally, Drile backed from the room, a little less certain than when he had entered.

I know one important fact, Drile. I am a fool. Fortunately, so are you.

Kenton strode down the steps outside the Pit, heading toward his rooms. He was tired of sitting around—the day before had been excruciating. He needed to do something; if he simply waited for his five days to run out, then he deserved to fail.

"Lord Mastrell?" a voice interrupted. Kenton turned to see an older sand master, perhaps forty, wearing the tan sash of a Fen. Kenton struggled to remember the man's name, and realized he didn't know it.

"Yes?" he said a little awkwardly.

"You wouldn't know which room my acolents and I are supposed to meet in, would you?"

Kenton frowned. "No, I'm afraid not. Why don't you just pick one?"

"Well, Lord Mastrell, Dirin had all of the rooms organized by year. He was going to find us a new one, because the one we were using was too small. Do you know where he is?"

"I sent him on an errand," Kenton explained. "You'll have to do without him for a few days. Just find yourself a room—it shouldn't matter too much."

"Yes, Lord Mastrell," the still unnamed sand master said, bowing

and walking back to the small group of students he was apparently in charge of.

Kenton continued walking across the courtyard, trying to reorganize his thoughts. The night before he had wondered about the Lord Merchant. Perhaps there was a way to break Vey's carapace-like exterior. He just had to—

"Lord Mastrell?" another voice asked. The servant wore a cooking apron, and had wide lips and a pudgy face.

"Yes?" Kenton asked with a sigh.

"Do you know where Lord Dirin is?"

"He won't be here for a few days," Kenton said again. "What do you need?"

"Well, he was arranging for us to get a shipment of travel *ZaiDon* in, just in case the Diem did get dissolved and the sand masters needed something to survive on for the next few weeks. I gave him a slightly false estimate—it appears that there's a shortage of *ZaiDon* lately. Several herds of sandlings to the north caught a disease, and we have to pay extra until new shipments arrive from the south."

"I'm certain it will be all right," Kenton assured. "I'll tell Dirin to see you when he gets back."

"Thank you, My Lord," the man said with a bow.

Kenton rolled his eyes in frustration, then continued his walk. He needed to go see Vey again—an activity he didn't look forward to. Their last meeting hadn't gone very well. He would probably have to bribe his way in this time—

"Lord Mastrell?"

"I don't know where Dirin is," Kenton said, turning with exasperation.

The younger man, an acolent with long hair, jumped at the comment. "Um, yes, Lord Mastrell," he said slowly.

Kenton nodded, turning again.

"But, Lord Mastrell?" the boy asked.

"Yes?" Kenton asked.

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

Kenton groaned. "A few days."

"A few days?" the boy asked with alarm.

"Take your problem to Elorin," Kenton suggested.

“Um, yes, Lord Mastrell,” the acolent said.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have sent Dirin away, Kenton thought, continuing his trek across the courtyard. He hadn’t realized how much the boy was doing—of course, thinking back on it, he should have guessed. Someone had to see that the Diem was kept running; Kenton was so busy trying to save the Profession that he didn’t have time for the small things.

This time he noticed the person walking toward him before they spoke. Kenton paused, preparing himself to explain once again that he had sent Dirin on a mission. This sand master, however, spoke first.

“Lord Mastrell, you might want to see this.”

“What?” Kenton asked with a frown, his comments about Dirin slipping away.

“Well,” said the sand master—an underfen perhaps twenty years old. “She just kind of walked in, and we didn’t know whether to do what she said or not. We couldn’t find you, and we know she’s a… friend of yours, so we just let her do what she wanted.”

Kenton rolled his eyes. “Where is she?”

Khriss sat at the back of the room, watching with interest. An older sand master in a brown sash stood at the front of the room, controlling a line of mastered sand. About six students sat in the room, watching him with somewhat bored eyes. Khriss smiled, remembering some of her own lecture in the university. These students weren’t much younger than she had been during her learning days, though most of her classmates had been much older.

She watched closely as the teacher lifted a rock with his sand. The students followed, lifting similar stones on their own desks. Some of them did it easily, others had a lot more trouble. One boy was able to lift the stone from above, grabbing the rock with an arrogant wave of his hand and pulling it into the air. The rest, however, did as their teacher, pushing their sand underneath the stone and levitating the object into the air by forming a kind of sand pole that extended from the rock to the ground.

It must be easier for them to push than pull, Khriss decided, scribbling a note on her ledger. It made sense—the weaker ones were really using the floor’s strength to push the stone into the air. The one boy could pull from above, but he appeared much stronger

than the rest.

The stones rose to different heights, several wobbling uncertainly. Apparently, ability to lift varied greatly amongst sand masters. Khriss looked closely. The higher the stones went, the thinner the students' strings of sand became. However, some of the strings started wider than others, so they could lift higher. More importantly, however, some students' sand glowed more brightly than others. The brighter the sand, the more power.

She hurriedly wrote the observation on her ledger. There were laws to sand mastery, obviously. A given string of sand could only hold so much weight, dependant on its diameter and its brightness —which, from what she gathered, was an indication of its density. Some people could control more sand in one string, and so they had more power than others.

"Enjoying yourself?" a voice asked.

Khriss jumped, scribbling an awkward line of white across her dayside ledger. Kenton stood in the room's open doorway a short distance away.

Khriss gave him a sheepish look. "They couldn't find you," she explained awkwardly. "So I asked if there was a place I could wait… they led me here."

Kenton eyed her disbelievingly.

The students lowered their rocks nervously, shooting looks at Kenton. He waved them back to their studies as Khriss rose and walked over toward him. He looked so authoritative in his distinctive white outfit that she almost forgot for a moment that he was just Kenton, the man she had grown to know quite well over the last few weeks.

He was changing, however. His personality was still the same, but he carried himself differently. He acted more like a leader; his orders were more assured, and he was more accustomed to being followed. It was hard to believe sometimes that he was the same age as she was—he seemed as old as the man teaching the class.

"Did you learn a lot?" Kenton asked, leading her from the room. She could tell her subversion of his authority wasn't appreciated. Suddenly, she felt very guilty. It had seemed like a good idea at the time…

Wait a minute, she thought, forcing the guilt out of her heart.

You're not doing anything wrong. You're trying to save your homeland—If that's not a noble goal, then nothing is. We need sand mastery.

"I didn't learn much," she admitted. "You came and got me too quickly."

Kenton nodded to himself. He didn't reprobate her, but the dissatisfaction in his eyes was bad enough to make her guilt resurface.

"You said sand masters couldn't tell me their secrets," Khriss explained, for to try and convince herself than Kenton. "You didn't say I couldn't try to learn on my own."

He didn't answer.

"All right," she said with a sigh. "I won't do that again." *Insufferable man. Doesn't he know what is at stake?*

"Good," Kenton said with a nod. "I know it is frustrating, Khriss," he said. "But the Diem isn't ready to be exposed yet. Once we're certain we will still be here in a few weeks, then we can decide how much we should reveal about ourselves. You have some good points, but now is not the time to implement them."

I don't have time to wait, Khriss thought with a sigh.

Ais entered walked into the Diem both excited and worried. The note Tain had delivered to him the night before had left him anxious and frustrated. But, when he had arrived at the Hall after leaving the Diem, he had found another note waiting—this one from someone completely different. Shaerezan's unnamed powerful ally, the one who had split from his boss. The note left no way to contact the dissident, but it did say that he was willing to meet. Ais was close—very close.

But, for now, he had to continue the job he had been given by the Lady Judge. Fortunately, he hadn't been forced to kill any more Kershtians the day before. Maybe the *Ry'Kensha* was right, maybe the family had already run out of assassins. However, he didn't really believe that to be the case. Kershtian families were large.

Shaking his head, Ais walked toward the Lord Mastrell, who stood with the darkside woman at the far end of the courtyard.

"I don't know why he continues to pay it," Kenton explained. "That is the biggest question I have right now. And that is why I'm going to see him today. You may come if you like."

Khriss shrugged. “I don’t have anything else to do now that I know Prince Gevalden is dead.”

Kenton frowned. Something was wrong—he hadn’t noticed it until just then. “Where is Baon?” he asked with surprise. The hefty bodyguard was nowhere to be seen.

Khriss paused. “He’s… not travelling with me any more,” she explained.

“What?” Kenton asked incredulously. “What happened to him?”

“It turns out Baon was a spy for the Dynasty,” Khriss said with an even voice. However, Kenton could sense the struggle within her as she tried to keep emotion from coming through.

“That can’t be,” Kenton said with a frown.

“He had us all fooled,” Khriss said with a shrug.

“But…” Kenton trailed off. “He can’t be a spy, he was so… so…”

“So Baon?”

“Exactly,” Kenton answered.

Khriss just shook her head. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “I’m not certain of much anymore.”

“So you just came here alone?” Kenton asked.

“No, Acron dropped me off,” she explained. “He and N’Teese went to buy some things. They should be back any time now.”

“We’ll probably meet them on the way,” Kenton said. “Come on—I’m tired of sitting around doing nothing.”

“Are we going somewhere?” a sleepy voice asked from above.

Kenton looked upward, where a recently awakened Eric stood on his balcony, looking down with tired eyes. “That depends,” Kenton announced. “Are you going with us?”

“I’ll have to miss breakfast,” Eric complained.

“All right, you can wait behind.”

“I’m coming,” Eric grumbled—an amazing feat, considering he managed to project the grumble all the way down to the courtyard. He disappeared into his rooms and joined them in the courtyard a few moments later.

“So, how exactly are you going to pursued the Lord Merchant to see you?” Eric asked.

Khriss walked beside the two men, the Kezare crowds splitting quickly before Kenton’s sash. His presence was causing quite a stir—even more than usual. The people didn’t see quite as scared—

more excited.

"I don't know," Kenton confessed. They were speaking in Dynastic, apparently for Khriss's benefit, though the conversation didn't really involve her.

"As I remember, your last meeting didn't end on particularly affable terms," Eric reminded.

Khriss still wasn't sure what to make of Eric. When she had found out that he was the son of the Lord General, she had been completely dumbfounded. He didn't look like a warrior, nor did he act like one. He was too casual—too uncaring. He didn't hold himself like Baon did, always alert for danger, but instead walked with an almost flippant attitude.

As soon as she made the comparison, however, her mind was drawn to another subject. Baon. It felt odd, walking these streets without his comforting presence at her side. Not only did he offer protection, but she had begun to rely on his simple wisdom.

Cynder is right, she thought with a nod. *He was far too… competent to be a simple mercenary. I should have realized…*

However, now he was gone. It was likely she would never see him again—he would return to Scythe and report that Gevin was dead. The Dynasty's purpose had been accomplished. The prince's death was a harsh blow for Elis.

In recent years, the Dynastic ambassadors had begun to hint that unless Elis subjugated itself to the Dynasty, the kingdom would be taken by force. Some of the noblemen—an alarming number of them—were beginning to suggest that surrender was a preferable option. Gevin had denounced them vigorously. He was—had been—the Dynasty's biggest enemy in the Elisian court; even the King the crown prince were less certain. During the two years of Gevin's absence, the King had opened talks with Scythe's emissaries, discussing just what a surrender of the crown would entail. If Gevin had been there, perhaps he could have stopped his father. But now…

She could still hear his voice, passionate and driven, in her mind. *Father hasn't seen the Dynasty, Khriss; he doesn't understand what it does. I've traveled through its provinces—you have no idea the poverty and despair of its people. Scythe keeps provinces, regions, and even cities isolated from one another. No*

one knows what is happening in the rest of the world, and they have no idea how poorly they're being treated. If we give into the Dynasty, it wouldn't only mean renouncing the monarchy and our titles. We would also have to dissolve the People's Senate and abandon the Code of Rights. All of the progress we've made during the last century would be lost.

Khriss smiled to herself at the memory. The recollection wasn't an exact picture of a place or time, more a general sense of what Gevin had been. His father didn't really care about such things as the People's Senate and the Code of Rights—in fact, the Senate had been a pebble in the Monarchy's shoe for some time. The King would probably be glad for an excuse to get rid of it. Gevin, however, had always been more liberal. At times he had almost seemed more like a commoner than a nobleman, which was partially why the people had loved him so much. He had truly believed in the rights of all men, even the lowliest, and that was one of the things Khriss had respected about him the most.

Khriss shot a look at Kenton, walking beside her on the crowded Kezare street. There was a slight frown on his face, and his brow was furled in concentration as he wrestled with the overwhelming burden he was forced to carry. Gevin would have had little difficulty performing where Kenton was only barely succeeding. The Prince had been able to turn rabid enemies into teatime friends after just one meeting. Gevin's charismatic force of will and mastery of politics had made him into a power that few could resist. In fact, Gevin had been good at everything. His jokes had been witty. He had been equally good at games of the mind and those of skill. He had passed his courses in the university with high marks. Gevin had been perfect in every way.

Why, then, hadn't she felt for him the emotion she was beginning to feel for this intolerable sand master?

Kenton was rude, he was hardly a skilled politician, and he infuriated her. He wasn't particularly handsome, and he definitely had something to learn about the proper way to treat a woman of noble birth. There absolutely nothing about him that she should find attractive. Yet, she did.

Perhaps it was his earnestness. Even now, as he walked toward another impossible confrontation, she could see the resolve in his

eyes. He didn't have the training or the upbringing, but he still tried. Where Gevin had been blessed with stunning looks and dazzling charisma, Kenton only had his sense of determination. And for some reason Kenton just felt more human to her than Gevin.

The prince had been perfect, but that made him unapproachable. How did one deal with a person so ideal? Khriss had loved him, to be certain, but it had been a more logical love. She had known she would marry him some day, she had respected his accomplishments and abilities, and had genuinely liked his personality. It had all seemed so simple—neat and orderly, just like one of her equations. They had met together often, discussing various topics of interest over meals, and then she had gone back to her books and Gevin had returned to his politics. The prince had been perfect, and she had been lucky to be his betrothed.

Kenton, however, infuriated her every time they met. But, at the same time, he invigorated her. There was no idle chatting with the sand master. Every conversation had a retort or an unexpected comment waiting at its end. However, some of the time she was able to get the better of him. He was more a person and less a god. Khriss could never have approached Gevin with problems or mistakes—they would have seemed too enormous in the face of his flawlessness. It was strange. She had enjoyed being with Gevin, but she had never really felt a loss when they parted at the end of one of their meetings. She kept finding excuses to visit the Diem, however.

It's just the sand mastery, she tried to convince herself. *Nothing more. You're being a foolish girl—you're associating the ability with the man. You don't want him, you just want his power.*

"Well?"

Kenton's comment startled her, and she immediately blushed, irrationally thinking that he had somehow known about her internal debate.

"Well what?" she asked, trying to cover he blush with a nonchalant air.

"Well, how are you going to get me in to see the Lord Merchant?" Kenton asked.

"You expect me to get you in?" Khriss demanded.

"You're the tactful one," Kenton explained. "We're almost there,

and honestly, I have no idea how to get in to see him. In fact, I don't even know what I'm going to say to him if I do get in."

"Then why are we here?" Khriss asked as they approached the Lord Merchant's office.

"I have to find a way to get Vey on my side," Kenton reiterated, shooting an uncertain look at the structure.

"Personally," Eric noted, "I think you'd have a better chance trying to get the A'Kar on your side."

Kenton sighed. "Well, I'll think of something," he mumbled, turning to walk up the steps.

"I'm sorry, but the Lord Merchant regrets to inform you that he is occupied with other matters."

Kenton frowned. They stood in the Lord Merchant's waiting room, the austere quarters filled, as usual, with hopeful supplicants. The doors leading into Vey's conference hall were open, though the turning hallway beyond didn't provide a view of the Lord Merchant himself. Still, Kenton couldn't hear the sounds of a discussion beyond, and he doubted that the Lord Merchant was 'occupied.' Of course, he hadn't really expected a warm reception.

"I thought you said you'd think of something," Eric noted in Dynastic. He stood behind with Khriss and Ais—the tract actually had a look of amusement on his face, a rarity considering his usual stern expression. Apparently Ais was enjoying Kenton's discomfort. Still, it was good to see him paying attention again—recently the trackt had been distracted by something, probably having to do with the reports he had been reading.

"Tell the Lord Merchant that I appreciate his busy schedule. I just wish a few moments to make amends between us. Our last meeting ended… abruptly, with tempers raging. Such is not a proper way for members of the Council to treat one another."

"I will see that he gets the message, My Lord," the attendant by the door said, not looking up from his ledgers.

Kenton frowned. Last time he had visited the Lord Merchant, the door attendant had been a young man, easily cowed by the sight of a sand master. This time, unfortunately, the boy had been replaced by an older, more experienced scribe. The man looked neither impressed nor frightened to be speaking with the Lord Mastrell.

Kenton scanned the small room. Its richly-dressed occupants

waited unhappily—they were not the type who were usually forced to wait for anything. Only the Lord Merchant could treat them so. The room's four Tower guards eyes Kenton appreciatively. Kenton could probably force his way past them, but it would be difficult to do so without hurting anyone. Besides, he recognized two of the men from his sparring practices at the Tower—he had no desire to put them in a situation where they were required to face his sand.

There had to be another way. *What is it I want from Vey? The tribute—I want to know why the Guild has paid the tribute all these years. There has to be some reason. Vey would never do such a thing unless there were something in it for him. Or… unless he was afraid for some reason. Afraid not to pay it.*

"Well then," Kenton said, projecting his voice loudly into Vey's conference chamber, "I suppose I shall be going. Just tell the Lord Merchant that when he has time, I would like to discuss the tribute. I expect that it will be paid as always… for the same reason as always."

He turned slowly, hoping to the sands that his ploy would work. He began to walk from the room, Khriss shooting him a confused look as Eric translated the statement.

"Wait!" a nervous, high-pitched voice called from deep inside the conference room. "Grelin, tell my colleague that I have found time for a brief conference. But, only he may enter."

Kenton smiled broadly. He nodded to the older attendant, who wore a confused frown on his face, then strode into the conference hall. He rounded the curve in the hallway to approach Vey's throne-like seat.

Vey whispered to a scribe beside him—the only other man in the room—who scuttled away. A few moments later Kenton heard the council chamber doors shut.

"All right, Lord Mastrell," Vey said, the side of his lips turning down in a sneer, "what do you want of me?"

"Nothing more than your vote, Lord Vey," Kenton replied with a knowing smile.

Vey cursed softly in Kershtian. "How did you find out?" he demanded.

"My father left behind records," Kenton lied.

Vey frowned to himself, leaning back in his chair. He looked—

embarrassed, and not a little annoyed. “Will this curse never leave me?” he hissed quietly in Kershtian.

“No one need know, Lord Merchant,” Kenton consoled. What could his father possibly have known about Lord Vey? “Give me your vote, and I will remain silent. I vow to tell no one, and take your secret to my funeral pyre.”

Vey paused, looking up with confusion. “You… won’t pass it on to the next Lord Mastrell?”

“Why would I do that?” Kenton said with a shrug. “We’ll have both passed from this world by then.”

Vey smiled.

I’ve won! Kenton thought with excitement. Then he realized something—Vey’s smile wasn’t one of relief, but one of understanding. He looked into Kenton’s eyes suspiciously, no longer nervous. Somehow, Kenton had given himself away.

“And if I refuse, Lord Mastrell?”

“I will proclaim your secret to all of Lossand,” Kenton threatened.

“And what secret would that be?” Vey pressed.

Kenton paused. *Sands! I was so close.* “The secret we both know,” Kenton said lamely.

Vey chuckled to himself, relieved, as he wiped his brow with a perfumed cloth. “I see, Lord Mastrell. Well, I have nothing to hide from Lossand. Feel free to tell the people whatever you want—be warned, however, that the Hall will require proof of whatever assertions you make.”

Kenton cursed to himself. Where had he made his mistake? What clue had he given away?

“I’ll find your secret, Vey,” he warned. “Give me your vote, and I promise not to even search. I will forget about this entire exchange. Be warned, however, that when I find out what it is, you will not receive such a lenient offer.”

“Blackmail, Lord Mastrell?” Vey asked with amusement. His eyes, however, betrayed a hint of anxiety.

Blackmail. That was what Kenton was proposing. The thought churned in his stomach—he had always been a man to confront people openly, and often with a great deal of yelling. The thought of pressuring Vey into giving his vote because of some dark secret

suddenly seemed incredibly vile to Kenton.

Can I take advantage someone like that, even if it is to save the Diem? It was a decision he didn't want to even think about. Of course, if he didn't find out what Vey was hiding, then it wouldn't matter anyway.

"We'll see, Lord Merchant," Kenton replied, turning to stride out of the man's chambers.

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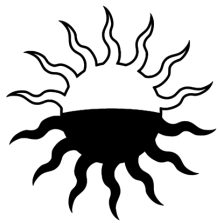


The doors to the Lord Merchant's chambers opened, letting out a frowning Kenton. Khriss felt a stab of disappointment—when he had been invited in, she had assumed that he had somehow found the Lord Merchant's weakness. However, if Kenton's expression was any clue, the conversation hadn't gone very well. Kenton shot her a look, then shook his head once.

"At least you got in," she offered.

"He's hiding something," Kenton explained, leading them out of the mansion-like office building. "My father knew what it was, and was using it to blackmail Vey into paying the Diem a tribute every few months."

"And you don't know what the secret is?" Khriss assumed.

Kenton shook his head. "It must be something extremely embarrassing, otherwise Vey wouldn't risk tarnishing his Kershtian image by helping the Diem."

"Well, I know one thing," Eric interrupted. "I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry," Kenton noted.

"When you spend three years living on the road, you learn to pay attention to where your next meal is going to come from. Today, I suspect it's going to come from you. How about a restaurant?"

Kenton shot Khriss a look and she shrugged. She'd never eaten

at a dayside restaurant—it could be interesting. He followed with a questioning look at Ais, but the trackt only gave him a flat stare in return.

"I suppose we might as well," Kenton said.

"Good," Eric said, heading for a building just a short distance from the Lord Merchant's offices.

It was a single story building, which were more common in this area of Kezare. It was squat and rectangular with stone walls and numerous windows. Inside they found a large room, the center filled with low tables surrounded by cushions, the walls set with booths and bench-like seats and taller tables. It was dark enough that Khriss removed her spectacles.

A Lossandin serving man noticed them and grew pale in the face, nearly dropping his tray of food. The room was about half-filled, and every table fell silent as its occupants turned to stare at Kenton.

"I'd almost forgotten about that," Kenton mumbled.

A serving man approached quickly, bowing several times and speaking in Lossandin. Kenton responded, gesturing toward one of the more private booths, and the man obsequiously led them over to sit down. Khriss seated herself beside Kenton, Eric sliding onto the other bench. Ais stood beside the table, eyeing it with a critical stare. Kenton said something to him, and finally the man shook his head, taking a seat at one of the central tables a short distance away.

Kenton sighed, turning away from the trackt.

"Eating with a sand master would be a major violation of his beliefs," Eric explained to her.

"You would think that after all this time travelling with me, he would have realized that I'm not the demon his people say I am."

"Why is that, anyway?" Khriss asked. "Why do they hate you?"

"It has to do with sand mastery," Kenton explained. "They believe the Sand Lord manifests himself in sandstorms, that the sand is his body and the sun is his eye. Sand mastery corrupts the sand somehow. I've never really understood it—of course, I've never had much reason to study *Ker'Reen*."

The serving man approached, speaking in Lossandin.

"Do you care what I order?" Kenton asked.

Khriss shrugged, running her fingers across the smooth, black carapace table. “Something that doesn’t have too much *Ashawen*,” she requested.

Kenton spoke quietly with the serving man for a moment, the sand master’s face took on a look of displeasure.

“What’s going on?” Khriss asked Eric.

“It’s more expensive than he expected,” Eric explained. “Restaurants are rare on dayside—only the very wealthy can afford to eat at them.”

“It’s more than that,” Kenton added. “It must be the carapace shortage—prices are rising all over town.” He sighed, then spoke again to the serving man. The server nodded and backed away with a respectful bow. Then the sand master turned back to the table, oddly silent, his face thoughtful.

“Trying to figure out what Vey’s hiding?” Eric assumed.

Kenton shook his head. “Trying to decide what I would do if I knew what it was.”

Eric snorted. “That should be easy.”

“I don’t know if I could do it,” Kenton admitted. “I threatened Vey, but he seemed to sense the uncertainty behind the words. I honestly don’t know that I could blackmail him into giving me his vote.”

“Vey is a piece of carapace sludge,” Eric argued. “You wouldn’t have to feel guilty about him.”

“That’s not the point,” Kenton said with a shake of his head. “The Lady Judge said that Diem needs the approval of all the Professions—that’s why the vote has to be unanimous. Without unified agreement that the sand masters should continue, there would be resentment. If I blackmailed Vey it would seem like… cheating somehow. If it were only my future I had to worry about, I would never blackmail him. However, I’m responsible for the entire Diem, now.”

Suddenly, he looked up at Khriss. “Khrissalla, you’ve been doing this longer than I. What would you do?”

Khriss blinked in surprise. “Doing this?” she asked.

“Leading people. Being responsible for them. Isn’t that what you told me your nobles do back on darkside?”

“Well, after a fashion,” Khriss admitted, feeling guilty. She had

known few members of the nobility who took as much concern for their people as Kenton did. Even Khriss herself hadn't ever really thought about her responsibility—not until this trip, where she was forced to deal directly with those she led.

All your talk about being a duchess, but if the truth be known, you're a worse leader than Kenton, who has only been Lord Mastrell for a week.

Kenton continued to look at her, a question in his eyes.

"You ask a difficult question," Khriss said, thinking back to her university courses in philosophy. Several had touched on topics similar to his dilemma. "Is a man justified in committing a slight evil if it is in the name of protecting a greater good? There have been great debates over this in the Elisian university."

"And what have your scholars determined?"

"I don't think they've determined anything," Khriss admitted. *Who am I to be talking about leadership?* she wondered wryly. He should ask Baon.

"I still don't think it's much of an issue," Eric said as their food arrived. "Vey's slime. The only way he'll do what is right is if you force him into it somehow."

Kenton didn't seem to like the answer, but he let the matter drop, turning instead to the meal. The serving man had brought them three large bowls filled with a kind of soup. However, the broth wasn't hot, but cold instead—almost chilled. Khriss raised the spoon to her lips, tasting the liquid. She'd never had cold soup before, but in dayside's heat, it was actually kind of refreshing. The broth tasted of carapace, and it was filled with large chunks of pickled vegetables. It wasn't the most delicious thing Khriss had ever eaten, but it was tasteful enough—a little salty, but free from the pungent *Ashawen*.

"You know," Kenton said as he ate, "I almost wish I hadn't spent all those years fighting. If I had taken the first sash I was offered, then I wouldn't be in this position now."

"True," Eric agreed. "Of course, the Diem would have been dissolved a week and a half ago."

Kenton nodded. "I suppose. Though that might not have been so bad—Lady Heelis said she was planning to try and get the sand masters a place in the Draft. We would have been a sub-Profession

under the Lord Artisan's leadership."

"That is, if Heelis succeeded," Eric reminded. "I've done a little bit of snooping on my own. Most people think that if you hadn't shown up, the Lord General and the Lord Merchant would have destroyed the sand masters completely."

"How could you do that?" Khriss asked with a frown. "Even if they dissolved the Diem, there would still be sand masters."

"They could have forbidden us to practice," Kenton explained, chewing on a chunk of radish. "Eventually, we all would have died off, and with us would have gone sand mastery."

"And new sand masters wouldn't be born?" Khriss asked.

"Sand mastery has to be trained," Kenton explained. "There aren't any spontaneous sand masters."

"Trained?" Khriss asked, suddenly interested. She tried to be nonchalant as she continued. "Trained how?"

Kenton smiled. "I'm not going to tell you that. I doubt even the Lady Judge knows that secret."

Khriss sighed. "All right," she continued, "then if sand mastery has to be trained, where did the first sand master come from?"

Kenton paused. "I hadn't thought about that," he admitted. "I don't know."

"I have another question," Khriss began.

"That's a surprise," Kenton mumbled, spooning up another sip of soup.

"What did you say?" she demanded.

"Nothing," he said. "Go on."

"Well," Khriss said, "you claim the Lady Judge would have tried to subjugate the sand masters underneath another Profession. Aren't they afraid that they couldn't control you? I mean, from what I've seen, a single sand master could easily be worth a dozen soldiers."

"Easily," Kenton agreed. "Before he died, I saw my father let loose a wave of sand that killed at least two hundred Kershtians."

"If I were in control, I wouldn't even think of subjugating you, or even letting sand mastery die off. I would either let you continue on, or I would have to destroy you completely. Anything else would be too dangerous."

Kenton shook his head. "You're probably right. Fortunately, I don't think they know how powerful we are. The sand masters

haven't been called to war for centuries—the only battles Lossand has had to fight recently came from an occasional Border Kingdom, and the Tower easily defeated them on their own. People have forgotten what the sand masters really are. They see us as secretive and mystical, but think our abilities are good for little more than the occasional hop through the air."

"This time, your reputation served you instead of hurting you," Eric agreed, already finishing the last of his soup. "The girl's right—you should be dead right now. If not by the Kershtians, then by your own countrymen. By the way, you should probably duck."

Kenton shot his friend a confused look, then followed Eric's nod across the room where a man—apparently one of the serving men—was lowering his arm toward Kenton's head.

"Aisha!" Kenton swore, pushing Khriss's head down and ducking beneath the table. A second later an arrow snapped against their booth.

Kenton moved, leaping out into the middle of the room, leaving Khriss beneath the table. She saw sand flash, and then the restaurant exploded with movement, patrons screaming and running for cover while assassins appeared from all directions, climbing in windows and dashing through the door, all focused on Kenton.

"You would think they'd have the decency not to interrupt lunch," Eric noted, still sitting in his seat.

Khriss raised her head, peeking nervously over the top of the table. Eric continued to pick at the last few vegetables in his bow, as if oblivious to the chaos happening a short distance away. Kenton had picked up a round carapace table with his sand and was swinging it wildly at his attackers. Ais was covering the sand master's back, picking off assassins with his *zinkall*.

"Eric!" Khriss said, not certain what to make of the ruckus. "Don't you think we should…"

"Help?" he filled in. "Kenton can take care of himself. Weren't you here for the conversations a few minutes ago? Killing hundreds of men with sand and all that."

"But, these ones are…" she struggled to remember the Kershtian word. "Sand-proof," she finally said.

"He can still take care of himself. Kenton's a—"

Eric stopped suddenly, his hand snapping forward to catch a misfired arrow as it passed in front of him. The tip stopped just a few inches from Khriss's face.

Khriss regarded the arrow with stupefaction, her mind barely realizing how close she had come to death, or at least a serious wound. Then, however, she turned her attention to Eric. He had moved so quickly, with reflexes she had assumed he lacked.

Eric ignored the extraordinary feat he had just performed, using the arrow to stab a vegetable from Kenton's bowl and raising it to his lips. "He'll be all right," he reiterated.

Khriss watched the battle with concern. Eric appeared to be right—Kenton was doing rather well. Three of the assassins already lay immobile on the floor, and a fourth was clutching one of Ais's arrows in his side. Only three remained, and they appeared to be out of arrows. They were trying to circle around and flank Kenton, but the wild sweeps of his table kept them at bay.

"I'm glad you're here, friend," Eric suddenly said. "This soup is delicious—I'd like another bowl."

Khriss looked at Eric with surprise, and only then did she notice the serving man who had been crawling their direction, as if frightened by the fight. The man's face was Kershtian and, Khriss noticed uncomfortably, he had a large bulge underneath the sleeve of his left arm. A *zinkall* shaped bulge.

The serving man stood quickly, pointing his arm at Khriss and yelling something toward Kenton.

The sand master turned with surprise, lowering his table when he saw Khriss. His three opponents quickly advanced on him.

"No!" Khriss yelled in alarm.

The assassin threatening Khriss turned with a smile. As he did so he got a face full of soup.

Eric leapt from his seat, slapping his hand at the Kershtian. However, the attack wasn't aimed at the man's face or chest, but his arm. Moving with the lithe precision of a warrior, Eric knocked the *zinkall* away from Khriss's face and then, with a second blow almost to quick to see, struck at the weapon itself.

The Kershtian's arm hissed for a moment, then fell silent. The assassin backed away, wiping his face and cursing as he pulled out his black carapace sword. Eric sat down on the edge of the table

and smiled at the man. As soon as the Kershtian attacked, however, Eric dodged out of the way, moving almost like an acrobat as he kept just beyond the man's thrusts.

So he is the Lord General's son, Khriss thought, pulling back against the side of her booth, watching Eric with amazement. She had never seen a man fight with such skill. Even Baon didn't fight like Eric—though, to be fair, swordplay was becoming increasingly rare on darkside. Eric's balance was incomparable, he leapt from table to table, sometimes using his weight to tip them over and block blows from his opponent.

Yet, for all his skill, Eric didn't attack. He continued to dodge, easily keeping away from the frustrated Kershtian, sometimes using flagons or bowls to bat the man's weapon away. As he fought, Eric abandoned the smile that always seemed to be on his lips. His eyes were focused and intense. As he dodged, his body suddenly didn't look quite as husky as it had before, his small paunch almost disappearing, his legs moving with a speed that denoted strength rather than fat.

Kenton had raised his table in time to ward off his foes, and was now using his sand to grab random objects, such as plates and bowls, and hurl them at his opponents. The missiles flew powerfully, and his three opponents were quickly reduced to a single man, whom Ais suddenly tackled from behind.

Then Khriss noticed something. One of the men who had fallen earlier had managed to get onto his knees. He rose, stumbling in her direction, raising his sword. His eyes were disoriented, but they were also hateful.

"Kenton!" Khriss yelped, searching for some sort of weapon. She was backed into a corner. She considered sliding beneath the table again, but that would do little good. So, instead, she moved out of the booth and tried to dash toward a nearby window.

The Kershtian lunged forward, grabbing her arm as she passed. The man swore at her in Kershtian, raising his weapon and screaming at Kenton.

There was a sudden crash in the air, and the Kershtian's chest exploded, spraying Khriss with gore. He tumbled to the ground, releasing her hand. Khriss stumbled backwards, sickened, stunned, and horrified. Then she looked up. "Baon?" she asked.

Acron stood in the doorway, his shaking arm holding Gevin's pistol.

Khriss felt herself slip backward, tumbling toward the floor in a daze. A strong arm caught her. A strong, glowing arm. She blacked out for a moment, and when she awoke she found herself gripped in an embrace of sand. Kenton was there a moment later, sitting her down against the wall and wiping the blood from her face with a rag.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I shouldn't have let you come with me."

She shook her head, gathering her wits, trying to remove the image of the assassin's sudden death from her mind. "Kenton?" she asked, still slightly disoriented.

"Yes?" he replied with concern.

"What is that rag made out of? You don't have sheep over here. I've always wondered how you make cloth."

Kenton chuckled. "You're hopeless," he said. "It comes from a *shalrim*, a plant that grows underneath sand of moderate depth. It's one of the main things we trade with the Kershtians for."

Khriss nodded—she had assumed it was something like that. "I'm all right," she said, taking a deep breath. "How is everyone else?"

"Eric is complaining of a bruised finger," Kenton said. "Other than that we're all right."

"My Lady," Acron said, kneeling on the ground beside her. "I'm sorry—I didn't know what else to do. He looked like he was going to strike you, and I didn't know what he was saying, so I just…"

"It's all right, Acron," Khriss assured. "You did the right thing." *And I thank the Divine you actually hit the person you were aiming for.*

Kenton gave her one final glance, as if he didn't believe her assertion that she was all right, then stood. "Ais," he said loudly. "I thought you said they wouldn't attack today." Eric, sitting in a nearby booth, translated his words for her.

The trackt knelt a short distance away, studying the body of the man Acron had killed. There was a deep frown on his face. "They shouldn't have," he said, rising. "At least, not by regular interpretation of the *KerKor*."

"The *KerKor*?" Khriss asked.

"Kershtian holy document," Eric explained. "Though, I suppose 'document' is a bit misleading. The thing is huge—it forms the basis for most Kershtian customs and laws. The Lossanders copied it when they made their Law."

"According to the *KerKor*," Ais continued, "the assassins can attack on odd numbered days by the Kershtian calendar. If they skip a day, they've missed their chance, and should wait another day."

"Well, they obviously didn't," Kenton challenged.

Ais just shook his head. "I don't know what to say," he admitted. "Whoever is doing this must not understand the *KerKor* very well."

"The A'Kar?" Kenton asked with surprise.

Ais snorted. "No, not the A'Kar, sand master. The one he assigned to perform the assassination. He must not have read the *KerKor* closely. I can't believe that anyone would ignore the stipulations intentionally."

Kenton sighed, turning concerned eyes back toward Khriss.

"I'm fine, really," she promised, standing up to prove her point. "I was just a little stunned."

"All right," Kenton said. "Ais, I assume you want to stay here?"

The trackt nodded. "Perhaps I can discover some clue as to who is organizing the attacks, *Ry'Kensha*," he said.

Ais watched the Lord Mastrell go, then turned back to his investigation. However, he wasn't as interested in the possibility of finding the man behind the attacks as he was in what had killed the assassin on the floor in front of him. He had seen—and heard—the strange weapons once before, when Kenton had been attacked in darksider town. Ais hadn't received an opportunity to investigate them that time.

Ais knelt beside the body and rolled it over, revealing the enormous hole in the man's back. Ais had never seen damage so extensive. With his eyes he traced a line from the dead man to the place the fat darksider had been standing. Then he moved the other direction, searching for the weapon that had killed in such a powerful, gruesome manner. He found the small bit of metal embedded in the far wall. It was spattered and mangled.

What was it? Some sort of strange power, like sand mastery? He had heard stories of the marvels of darkside, but had never believed

them. Somehow, the tube the darksider had been holding was powerful enough to slay a man faster than Ais could blink.

"Sir!" Tain said, hurrying into the room, bringing a dozen of Ais's trackts with him.

Ais stood. "Clean this up," he requested. "See if you can determine anything about the one who send them."

"Yes, sir," Tain said, saluting. Then he proffered a black piece of paper. "Here, this came for you today."

Ais frowned. It looked suspiciously like one of Nilto's letters. However, when he ripped it open, undoing the seal made by wiping a tiny bit of water on the edges of the paper and folding it together, he found that he was wrong. It wasn't from Nilto. It was actually from a completely different source.

Meet me at eighth hour in the building where you caught Lokmlen, it read.

"What is it?" Tain asked.

Ais's face was emotionless, but he was smiling inside. "A gift from the Sand Lord himself."

Kenton was only just beginning to understand what a horrible thing responsibility could be. As a boy, he had seen the Lord Mastrell as an arrogant tyrant, a man who played with the emotions of others for his own pleasure. The boy Kenton had seen no logic behind Praxton's decisions; he had seen only the hurt, not the further pain that hurt could prevent. Life had been easier then—Kenton had been so certain of what was right and what was wrong.

Kenton stood in his rooms, trying to confront the decisions before him. What would he do if he were given the opportunity to blackmail the Lord Merchant? He wasn't certain yet, though he did resent the need to make such a decision. However, as Lord Mastrell, he somehow knew that this would not be the first difficult choice he would be forced to make—assuming, of course, the Diem and he both survived the next few days. It was almost as if he were a sacrifice for the rest of the sand masters. As leader, he would tarnish his sense of right and wrong so that the rest of them could maintain their innocence.

No wonder Eric fled all those years ago, he thought suddenly.

He could see the young Eric in his mind, a tall, powerful boy with close-cropped dark hair and intense eyes. Eric had always been

the same, so quick to please, so formal and righteous. He had been the same up until the day before he left when, inexplicably, he had suddenly cracked.

It had happened during *NaishaLa*, one of the traditional Kershtian feasting days. Kenton had been with Eric at an enormous feast thrown by the Lord General. Kenton still didn't know what had set Eric off, what final grain of sand had proven too much for him to bear. They had been eating, Kenton monopolizing the conversation as he usually did. Then, Eric had suddenly exploded into a mess of tears, accusations, and pain. He had run from the party, cursing his father, Kenton, and the formless sense of 'responsibility' he felt.

The next day, Eric had left for darkside. His only explanation for his outburst had been to say he just couldn't handle the idea of some day becoming Lord General. He had disappeared for three years.

I almost wish I could do the same, Kenton thought ruefully. It wasn't just the decision about Vey—that was a minor thing, really. He didn't even know what the Lord Merchant was hiding. His stress was greater than one complaint—it was everything combined. It was the knowledge that so many people depended on him, the feeling of helplessness in the face of the Diem's awesome problems. Most recently, it was the knowledge that being near him could prove deadly to his friends.

The attack earlier in the day had shaken him more than any so far. For the first time, the assassins had specifically targeted those around him as a means of forcing him to stop fighting. Poor Khriss had nearly been killed in the attack, not to mention Eric. He even worried about Ais—the obstinate trackt wasn't really a friend, but Kenton would feel terrible if the man died in his defense.

So, he finally understood what had made Eric flee. This new Eric, the carefree vagabond, wasn't really so new. He had always been there, hiding behind Eric's statuesque persona. Kenton had seen hints of the boy's true personality, though such glimpses had been rare. It was responsibility—the knowledge of what he would have to become—that had forced Eric to be so stiff.

The other thing that bothered him was his upcoming fight with Drile. The duel was like an ominous sandstorm, blowing in the

distance. Kenton couldn't avoid it, no matter how he tried. He had to face Drile.

If only there were a way to increase my power, he thought with frustration, pounding the balcony banister lightly with his fist. He'd thought he had it figured out. Overmastery made so much sense. It was the only thing that could have increased Kenton's powers, and it was a good explanation as to why mastrells were so powerful. Why, then, had Overmastering taken away Elorin's powers.

Maybe you have to be very careful, Kenton thought. *If you go too far, you burn away your powers. But, if you Overmaster just enough, you tax your abilities and cause them to stretch.*

It made sense, but there were still too many questions. Dare he try Overmastering? What if he lost his powers? What if he didn't get them back in time for the fight? What if the Kershtians attacked while he was helpless?

"*Ry'Kensha*," Ais's voice said.

Kenton looked up, turning around on the balcony to look back at the trackt, who sat looking over papers in his usual place.

"Yes, Ais?" Kenton replied.

"I trust you will not object if I leave you now?" Ais replied, stacking his papers together and rising from his seat.

Kenton frowned, checking the time. The moon was barely visible peaking over the Diem roof to the southwest. It was only eighth hour; Ais usually stayed at least until tenth hour.

"You're leaving early," Kenton noted. "What is happening, Ais? Do you have a pretty woman waiting for your company somewhere?"

Ais didn't respond, maintaining his normal expressionless face. "I have Hall duties to deal with," he said simply.

"Hall duties?" Kenton prodded.

Ais shot him a look, obviously not appreciating the intrusion. Kenton didn't care—the trackt had been intruding on Kenton's affairs for the last ten days.

"I am close to catching a criminal," Ais finally explained. "A very important one. Today I have a meeting with one of his former associates."

"Sounds interesting," Kenton said, he said impassively. He needed something—anything—to take his mind off of his moral

dilemmas. “Perhaps I can help.”

“I doubt it,” Ais said with a stern voice. “Your presence won’t be necessary.”

Kenton shrugged. “If you wish, Ais. While you’re gone, though, I think I’ll go and speak with one of the Taisha. I haven’t been to meet with the Lord Farmer yet.”

Ais paused, and Kenton caught a glimmer of conflict in the Kershtian’s eyes. He had been ordered to spy on Kenton for the Lady Judge. She obviously wanted to know what kind of deals Kenton was making to get the Taishin on his side. Ais knew Kenton’s threat was a hollow one, but if Kenton did go to see a Taisha while Ais wasn’t there, the trackt would be in obvious violation of his orders.

“All right,” Ais finally said. “You may come with me.”

They stopped first at Ais’s house, where the Ais left a note for his family. What he was doing could be dangerous—if something were to happen, Ais wanted them to know what he had been doing. After that, they made their way to the meeting place, the very room where Ais’s band had been attacked a week before, the place where Jedan had been killed. Ais stood by the window, keeping a careful look on the building’s entrance three stories below.

“So, who is it we are meeting?” Kenton asked quietly, peeking out the window beside Ais.

“I don’t know,” Ais confessed.

“You don’t know?” Kenton asked incredulously.

“He didn’t give his name,” Ais said with annoyance. “Those who work with Sharezan don’t often publicize the fact.”

“Sharezan?” Kenton asked. “That’s who you’re trying to catch?”

Ais nodded, wondering for the hundredth time why he had agreed to bring the fool of a mastrell along.

“Sands, Ais, that man is supposed to be insane!” Kenton said. “Don’t you think we should have brought some more men?”

“We’re not meeting Sharezan,” Ais said. “Just one of his associates.”

“One you think will betray him,” Kenton pointed out.

“Yes.”

“That sounds dangerous enough to require a few more tracts,” Kenton noted.

Ais snorted quietly. “I have you, don’t I, Lord Mastrell?”

“Yes, but you weren’t going to bring me. Besides, you hate it when I try to help you.”

Ais sighed to himself, turning to the white-clothed Lord Mastrell. Kenton was right—it was dangerous—but Ais couldn’t admit that. He couldn’t tell Kenton that the reason he hadn’t brought any more men was because he didn’t want them to know what he was doing.

Technically, he shouldn’t be here. The Lady Judge had taken him off the Sharezan case. Though she hadn’t expressly forbidden him to continue investigating, Ais doubted she would be pleased to hear of this meeting. He hadn’t even told Tain or the other members of his personal band.

“What reason would I have for bringing other trackts?” Ais asked. “To protect me? If the man we are going to meet wanted me dead, he could have accomplished that goal with much simpler methods.”

“And if he tries to escape?” Kenton asked.

“If he runs, then that means I have failed,” Ais explained. “Catching an uncooperative man won’t lead me to Sharezan.”

“If you say so,” Kenton said, unconvinced.

Ais offered no further explanation, continuing to keep watch below. *I have to find the answer,* he thought to himself. *I have to find the proof I seek.* He had been trying for years to prove his suspicions, that Nilto and Sharezan were the same man. If he could just find one witness.…

Ais paused. He had thought he’d heard a noise coming up the stairs. But that was impossible—he’d been watching the entrance the entire time.

Kenton had raised his head—he had heard it as well.

Aiesha! Ais cursed himself. The building had been a criminal safehouse—of course it would have secret entrances. He composed himself, preparing to deal with the person approaching. He would offer immunity in exchange for information. The man would talk—the news on the street was that he was scared, whoever he was. Kenton was right, Sharezan was insane, and he was displeased with his subordinates. In a way, Ais could thank Sharezan himself for arranging this meeting. If his people hadn’t felt so threatened, they wouldn’t be looking to deal with the trackts.

Ais paused. Something was wrong. Suddenly, his senses came alert, his body tense.

"What?" Kenton asked nervously.

Ais held out a hand for silence. He listened carefully to the approaching footsteps. One pair was odd, uneven. As if… it were walking with a limp. *Nilto. Sharezan. I've been betrayed.*

"Aisha!" Ais cursed, turning to duck through the broken wall toward the back room. Kenton followed whipping out a handful of sand.

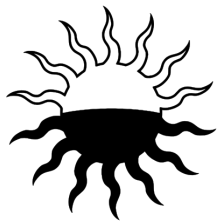
"What?" he repeated.

"You were right, *Ry'Kensha*," Ais explained. "It is a trap."

Kenton looked at him with confusion, a question on his face. Ais ignored him, swinging out of the window and sliding down the same ladder that Lokmlen had used to make his own escape. A second later the Lord Mastrell dropped to the ground beside him on a line of blasphemous sand.

Nilto must have caught him before he met with us, Ais thought with anger, moving out of the alley and into the ever-present Kezare crowd. *Another opportunity lost.*

– 30 –



Khriss sipped her tea. The drink helped calm her. After the day's events, and her near death, the soothing warmth was welcome. She sat beside the fire, wrapped in a soft house robe, trying her best to believe she was back on darkside. It wasn't working.

The fire blazed, but the thick glass kept out much of its heat. The room looked like one from Elis, but there were subtle differences. Some of the finishings appeared to be wood at first, but were really carapace painted brown. Despite Idan's cleanings, there were still specks of white sand in corners and crevices around the room. And, of course, there was the ever-present sun's heat, tangible here even where she was hidden away beneath the rock.

I don't belong here, Khriss thought, drinking her tea. *I never belonged here. I shouldn't have come. Everyone already assumed that Gevin was dead—what have I proven? Sand mastery might be worth the effort, but Kenton will never open up to me. He doesn't trust me—as he shouldn't.*

Yet, she had seen something in his eyes earlier, when he had seen her in danger. Something that whispered that there might be another reason for her to stay on dayside.

She had to stay for another few days at least. She couldn't leave until she knew whether Kenton had succeeded or not, whether he lived or not. She had spent years wondering about Gevin; she

wouldn't go through that again.

She heard the front door open and close, then a set of light footsteps padded down the short set of stairs to the den. Only one person with so slight a step would be coming to her house.

"Hello, N'Teese," Khriss said, not looking up.

"Nilto sent you a message," N'Teese said, not bothering to return Khriss's greeting.

"Yes?"

"He says he hasn't been able to find out anything about Baon," N'Teese explained. "And says he's not going to be able to look any longer. He's leaving Kezare for a little while."

"Leaving?" Khriss said with a frown. "Where is he going?"

"Why would he tell me that?" N'Teese replied.

"Never mind," Khriss said with a sigh, finishing the last of her tea. In a way, she was glad to be rid of the offensive man—she hadn't really expected him to find Baon, she had only gone to him because she didn't know what else to do.

Baon is probably on a ship back to darkside right now, she thought.

Besides, she suspected that Nilto wouldn't have told her even if he had found the warrior. The Lord Beggar obviously hated her, or, at least, he hated her richness. He hadn't wanted to deal with her in the first place. She wouldn't care if she never saw the repulsive creature again.

You're being unfair, she chastised herself. At least he had sent a message through N'Teese—he could have just left. In addition, he had returned Gevin's pistol and signet to her, even if he had made light of her pain. A man such as he had a right to be angry with the rich. Khriss's time on dayside had taught her many things, and one of them was exactly how frustrating it was to be treated like an inferior. Her waiting at the offices of the various Taisha had been unsatisfying for more than one reason—she was becoming increasingly aware of how unimportant her title was. Her realization the day before, in the restaurant with Kenton, had only strengthened that awareness.

Judge people, not faces, duchess. Baon's words returned to her, counseling her even after his disappearance. She owed the man so much, even if he was a traitor. She wished she could have told him

that much, at least, before he returned to the Dynasty.

People, not faces. Something was nagging at her mind, a connection waiting to be made. An observation she had passed over a dozen times. It was something simple, but for some reason she couldn't figure out what it was.

It finally came to her in the form of a single word, spoken carelessly.

Khriss strode through the streets of Kezare, for once heedless of the jostling crowds. Acron hustled beside her, working hard to keep up. The overweight linguist had heard her leaving, and had insisted on accompanying her to provide protection in the event of danger. After his surprising performance earlier in the day, Khriss was willing to admit he might actually be useful. N'Teese led her through the crowd, barely visible in the distance.

However, at that moment she wasn't thinking about Acron or N'Teese. She was focused on how much sense everything suddenly made. She should have seen it earlier.

"He was right here," N'Teese explained, pointing toward a less-populated street.

Khriss turned the corner, looking down the street. There was no sign of Nilto.

"The docks," Khriss guessed, turning back to the street. This time she led the way, pushing in the now-familiar direction, leaving N'Teese and Acron behind. The docks were only a short distance away. However, when she arrived, she looked with despair across the shifting mass of people, loading and unloading, buying and selling, tallying and organizing. How would she ever…

A stooped-over form suddenly stood out in the crowd. There was a small bubble of open space around his limping body, and the crowd gave him a wide berth. Nilto. He was heading for the plank of a ship ready to set sail.

Khriss rushed forward, ramming through the crowd. She vaguely caught sight of Acron joining the fray behind her, though she had completely lost sight of N'Teese. It didn't matter. She just had to catch Nilto before he left. Unfortunately, she was still a good distance away when the Lord Beggar reached the plank and started walking up toward the deck.

She gathered he strength, and put it into one piercing yell,

projecting her voice over the crowd's hustle. "Gevin!"

Nilto paused. He turned, his single eye scanning the crowd behind him until it fell on her. His scarred face frowned—a face that betrayed shambles and remnants of a face that had once been so familiar to her. She should have noticed, should have seen through the destruction. The Elisian guard had told her about Gevin's injury, said that he had taken a pistol shot in the head. He should have told her that the shot to the head had really been one to the face—of course, she should have figured that out on her own. The only way he could have been shot in the head and survived, even long enough to be taken to Kezare, would have been if the ball grazed his face. Tearing away the eye and nose, shattering the jaw so his speech became slurred…

Gevin stood on the plank for a long moment, then he limped back down and waited as she pushed through the final distance to stand in front of him. A brief second later Acron managed to disengage himself from the crowd behind them.

"So, you figured it out," Gevin noted.

Khriss nodded.

"What gave me away?"

"Our last meeting," she explained. "You called me Khriss."

"Ah," Gevin said with a nod. "You've changed so much, my dear. You would never have noticed such an error before."

"Gevin," Khriss said, pained. He had spent all this time knowing she was on Dayside, had spoken with her on three separate occasions, and never revealed himself. "Why?" she asked quietly.

Gevin moved a little to the side and gestured for her to follow. He led to a large pile of boxes a short distance away, moving behind the obstruction to give them a little bit of privacy from the crowds. They weren't completely secluded—dockworkers continued move the boxes, loading them on a nearby ship—but it did feel a little more personal.

"Why?" he repeated. "Do you really think I could return, looking like this?"

"Yes," Khriss said flatly. "Your looks don't matter, Gevin. Your duty is what is important."

"Duty?" Gevin asked with a harsh laugh. "Duty to a country that didn't want to be saved? They were just waiting to get rid of me so

they could crawl to Scythe and offer to kiss his feet. No, Khriss, I've found a new duty. Here, on dayside, amongst those who are now my brothers."

"You should have sent word," Khriss challenged. "Told us something, so we wouldn't come looking for you."

"Sending word to Elis would have been as good as sending word to the Dynasty," Gevin said with a shake of his head. "Scythe has so many agents and lackeys amongst Elis's elite, he needn't have bothered trying to kill me. But, Scythe always has been thorough. No, Khriss, I couldn't send you word—I had to hope that Scythe assumed me dead, and would leave me alone. Besides, the Khrissalla I knew would never have done something as reckless as coming to look for me."

"You left me alone, Gevin," Khriss whispered. "What else was I to do? I loved you."

Gevin shook his scarred head, turning from her to Acron, who was standing at her side. "So, you're the one," Gevin noted.

Khriss frowned, her stunned mind barely registering the comment. She turned to see that Acron had pulled out the pistol she had given him. Gevin's pistol.

"Are you finished?" Acron asked conversationally, sounding very much unlike himself.

"I assume I am," Gevin said. "In more ways than one. I should have left town the moment I learned that Khrissalla was on dayside."

"Probably," Acron agreed. "The girl has enough curiosity for ten men."

Gevin tried to back away, but Acron cocked the pistol as he did so. "You heard my story," Gevin explained through his mangled face. "I am of no threat to the Dynasty."

"You said it yourself," Acron said. "Scythe is very thorough."

Khriss stared at the gun with disbelief. Acron's entire bearing had changed. His face was hard, rather than jovial, his eyes keen as opposed to foolish.

"Acron?" she asked with amazement.

"Don't curse yourself, duchess," Acron said, a slight smile on his lips. "Like I said, Scythe's assassins are extremely well-trained."

Khriss backed away, stunned. The dockworkers continued to

load boxes, completely oblivious to the danger. Acron raised the weapon toward Gevin, who was trying to scoot away.

There was a thunderous explosion, powder detonating.

Acron fell to the ground.

Khriss gasped in surprise, then looked up as one of the dockworkers threw back his hood and stood up straight, suddenly standing a full foot taller than those around him. His bald head was a dark black.

"Baon!" Khriss exclaimed as the tall warrior climbed over one of the boxes and walked toward her. Behind him the other dockworkers scattered in alarm, frightened by the sudden explosion. Khriss ignored them, grabbing Baon in a very unduchessly hug.

Baon bore it with an uncomfortable face. Finally she released him and he nodded toward Acron's body. "Funny," he noted, "I'd almost convinced myself it was the other one."

"Cynder?" she asked with amazement.

Baon nodded. "I was sure no one could possibly be as obtusely sarcastic as he is."

"Then you…" Khriss trailed off.

Baon nodded. "I knew it was one of the two. Scythe never trusts soldiers to do as they're told. He always sends a back up."

The click of a hammer being drawn was the only warning they had. Baon pushed her to the side, diving in the other direction as the pistol went off. One of the carapace boxes behind them shattered. Acron, surprisingly nimble for a man of his bulk, tossed aside the pistol and leapt to his feet, ignoring the wound in his side. Baon cursed, trying to raise one of his own weapons, but Acron moved more quickly, tackling the warrior and slamming him against the dock's stone.

A second later both men were on their feet again, swinging and kicking at each other with precision. Acron, despite his fat, moved as dexterously as Baon, blocking the mercenary's attacks with fluid movements. The two fought with a form of combat Khriss had never seen before, striking with their fists in the same way the other men would use weapons. They spun and blocked, moving almost superhumanly quick. The two seemed evenly matched. Acron even seemed to be getting a bit of an upper hand—right up to the

moment when Khriss shot him.

The smoke cleared from the third shot, and Acron toppled to the ground. This time, Baon quickly grabbed the fat man's neck and twisted it with a snap, just to make certain. Baon rose, breathing heavily. Never, in all the times the had been attacked during the expedition, had Khriss seen the large warrior so winded from a battle.

"He was good," Baon said appreciatively, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Of course, the fact that he managed to hide from me all these months was enough to indicate that." He nodded toward the pistol in Khriss's hand. "Thank you."

"Baon…." Khriss said. "So you're not a spy after all?"

"Actually," Baon noted, "I am. I didn't lie to you, I was sent by the Dynasty. I am not here to kill the prince, however."

"But…." Khriss began. However, before she could continue, she noticed something. Gevin was getting away. The Lord Beggar was limping clandestinely away from the boxes.

"Wait," Khriss ordered to Baon, then rushed forward.

"Gevin?" she asked, laying a hand on his shoulder.

Gevin spun, shaking off her touch with a curse. "Why are you still following me, woman?" he demanded. "You've already led one assassin to me. Are you determined to see me dead?" Despite the calm front he had displayed for Acron, he was obviously shaken.

"But, Gevin," Khriss began. "The assassin is dead. You can come back with me, you can…."

"Go back?" Gevin demanded. "Why would I want to go back? Scythe will just send more assassins for me."

"You'll be safe in Elis," Khriss said.

Gevin snorted, his eyes flickering toward Acron's body. "No, Khrissalla, I don't think so. This is why I couldn't tell you—or anyone—where I was. I've been living in terror these last few years. The Dynasty tried to kill me once. Somehow I knew, knew that Scythe would seek me out. Here, at least, I could hide. I'm another person. Here people know me for what I really am, not for a title. Tell me, why would I want to go back?"

Khriss paused. "To be with me?" she whispered quietly.

Gevin snorted. "Ah, Khrissalla. Changed in some ways, but still so innocent."

Khriss paused. “What do you mean?”

Gevin looked into her eyes—there was anger there, anger at being discovered. There was something else, something much more deep. Something she had never seen before, but must have been there all along. Annoyance.

“So innocent,” Gevin said, his voice almost a hiss. “You never knew. You never even suspected. I had dozens of them over the years. Some of them common girls, others more noble.”

“No!” Khriss whispered.

“The entire court knew about it, of course,” Gevin explained. “It was quite the scandal. But you never even grew suspicious. You were always so consumed by your books and your ledgers—you took little notice of what was happening around you.”

“No…” Khriss repeated, growing sick.

“They laughed at you,” Gevin said with a shrug, “and I laughed with them. I knew I would be forced to marry you some day, but I couldn’t imagine life with you as my bride. You were such a dull creature. You hid from excitement and the world, and it was so tedious to deal with the drivel you thought of as conversation. You know, half the reason I left for dayside was to get away from you.”

Khriss felt her knees grow weak, and she felt like sliding ground. However, something kept her upright, kept the sobs of agony from bursting forth right there. It was as if she didn’t even have the strength left to break down.

“Leave me alone, woman,” Gevin hissed. “Go back to darkside and leave me be.”

The old Khriss would have run. She would have fled before Gevin’s vengeful tongue. However, Khriss was half surprised to realize she had more strength than she realized.

Khriss felt herself raise her pistol, cocking the second hammer. “No,” she said. “You go. After all I did, after all my searching…. Get out of my sight, Gevin. Leave before I decide to shoot you.”

Gevin chuckled to himself, standing. “I almost believe you would. It’s a pity, dear Khriss. You’ve grown so much—if you had been more like this two years ago, perhaps I wouldn’t have been forced to run away.”

Khriss felt her face grow hot, then she cursed quietly to herself, lowering the weapon.

Gevin smiled, then nodded toward the body. “By the way, thank you. I guess I won’t have to be leaving town after all. It’s odd—I’d heard that the large fellow behind you was the one who wanted me dead. I guess sometimes one’s sources can be wrong, can’t they, Khriss?”

Khriss frowned, regarding the creature that had once been her betrothed. He sickened her. Not his appearance, but his attitude. Maybe being on dayside had convinced him of what he really was, and maybe he really was doing some good for the outcasts of Kezare. He had still, however, abandoned his first duty—that of his people back in Elis.

“I only want to know one thing, Gevin,” she said as he turned to walk away. “What made you give up? I’ve never known you to abandon an objective. You came here to get the sand masters. I can understand you deciding to stay if you’d found the sand mages were a delusion, but that isn’t the case. They’re real, Gevin! They can save Elis! You were right. Why give up?”

Gevin shook his head, not looking back at her. “Foolish, innocent Khriss,” he said. “Haven’t you realized yet? The sand mages exist, true, but they are of no use to us.”

“What do you mean?” Khriss demanded.

Gevin turned slightly. “Sand mastery turns sand black, Khriss,” he explained.

“Yes,” she prompted.

“There is only one way to turn mastered sand white again,” he said, continuing to walk away. “It needs the sun. Sand masters would be useless on darkside—they wouldn’t have a way to recharge their weapon.”

Khriss stood, receiving her third incomprehensible shock of the day. *Useless. This entire expedition was a waste. Oh, Shella…*

Gevin tried to sneak away, but black-uniformed trackts began to surround them, looking over the scene with confusion. The Lord Beggar sighed, and began to speak with them in Lossandin.

Khriss, however, didn’t want to bother with tracts—she had something else to worry about. She turned to Baon with annoyance. “Why did you make me think you were being employed by the Dynasty?” She demanded.

“I am,” Baon said simply.

This brought Khriss up short, and she frowned. “What?”

“It is as I said when you asked me. I was sent do dayside by Lord Scythe.”

“But…” Khriss said in confusion.

“My mission was different from Acron’s,” Baon explained, watching trackts poke at the assassin’s body. “I was sent to determine if the sand masters were a threat to the Dynasty. Now, thanks to your former betrothed, I know they are not.”

“But you shot Acron!” Khriss said with surprise. “He was one of your own!”

“I was also hired to protect you,” Baon said. “I take all of my duties seriously, even if I entered them under false pretenses.”

“I don’t understand,” Khriss confessed.

Baon leaned forward, his dark eyes unreadable. “I am loyal to the Dynasty, duchess. That does not mean, however, that I agree with everything Scythe does. Gevalden is of no danger to us now. As for Acron, I have little respect for a man who would so betray his own country. Besides, he would have killed you.”

“You’re sure?” Khriss asked with surprise.

Baon nodded simply. “His cover was too useful to let it be spoiled by a single girl. He would have shot Gevalden, then you would have been next.”

Khriss shook her head. Things were too confusing at the moment —she needed time to think. Gevin’s barbs, spoken in anger, had hurt her more than she wanted to admit. She had always thought he was so perfect. It was like now that his face was scarred, he felt he could let out the vile emotions he had always kept hidden from her.

“I need to think,” she sighed. “Go back to darksider town and get Cynder, then meet me at the Diem.”

Baon paused.

“Please?” Khriss said. “I need the time in the boat alone.”

“All right,” Baon agreed.

Nilto watched her go, looking through the crowd of trackts as Khriss made her way to a small boat. Nilto. That was how he thought of himself now. Not as Gevin, the court fool, but as Nilto, the Lord Beggar. He felt so much more like a lord now than he ever had in Elis.

Farewell, my duchess, he thought. His words had been true, he

had taken many lovers during his years in Elis. It was odd that he had never felt guilt about that fact until he had lay on the sands of dayside, the sun beating down on him, his face a mass of pain and agony. Then, he had felt guilty for so many things. He had remembered his double-dealings, his betrayals of Elis, and his cheating of his friends—all done while pretending to be so self-righteous.

Khriss stooped slightly as she walked. *She deserves to know what I was*, Nilto decided, turning away from Khrissalla. *This way, perhaps, she can forget me.*

He had never deserved her in the first place.

Kenton woke to the sound of pounding on the door. He blinked drowsily, sitting up on his sand mattress, confused. What time was it?

He yawned, stumbling to his feet. The day had gone fairly uneventfully following Ais's attempted meeting the day before. They had returned to the Diem, where Kenton had been forced to spend the day's remaining hours making decisions about supplies, room assignments, and settling minor disputes between other sand masters. He hadn't realized how much he had been depending on Dirin to take care of such things.

He had retired exhausted, and a little frustrated—though not so much as Ais, who had left at the end of the day in an even worse mood than he was usually in. Apparently, he had been depending heavily on the chance to turn one of Shaerezan's subordinates.

The knocking continued—there was an annoyed edge to the sound. Kenton yawned again, throwing on a white robe and tying his sash around his waist. He stumbled out of the bed chamber and into the main room, pulling open the door just as the knocking began again.

Khrissalla stood outside. She wore a simple blue dayside robe, cut for a man, like usual. Her eyes were a little puffy, but her face was unreadable. Something had happened, but she was hiding it well.

"Khriss?" he asked, shaking the last bits of sleepiness from his mind.

Khriss walked through the door, moving to stand in the center of the room, her arms folded. Kenton watched the strange behavior

with a frown. What was going on?

"I found Prince Gevalden," she finally said. "He's alive."

The announcement hit Kenton like a wave of frigid riverwater. Suddenly alert, he let the door slide closed. "That's wonderful," he said, noting the lack of enthusiasm in his voice. *I was right—she has been crying. However, they were tears of joy.*

"He's the Lord Beggar," Khriss explained. "He took a pistol shot to the face two years ago, completely destroying his features."

"I see," Kenton said, feeling stunned and strangely sick. *She actually found him. Fool, you knew the only reason she was here was to find her betrothed. Why are you so surprised? Did you expect something else?*

"Congratulations," he said, nodding in her direction, trying to mask his pain. This is what she had wanted—what she had dreamed of. Who was he to spoil her victory? "After all you have been through, Khriss, you deserved to find him. I hope he realizes what a fortunate man he is."

The words sparked a reaction in Khriss, but not the one he expected. She pulled her folded arms in tightly, shaking slightly, as if she were very cold.

"He said he didn't want me," she whispered, looking down at the floor. "He said… he said he left darkside to get away from me. That I sickened him, and that I always had, because I was dull and unexciting."

Kenton paused for just a moment, feeling helpless. Then she looked up, her wide, despairing eyes meeting his own, and he couldn't hold himself back any longer. He walked forward, gathering her in his arms. She responded, resting her head against his chest, still quivering.

"My entire life has been a lie," Khriss whispered. "I have been Gevin's betrothed since I can remember. I ordered my life around that single idea, doing things I assumed would make him happy. He was so perfect, and I wanted to be perfect for him. He was seeing other women the entire time, flaunting them around the court. Everyone knew but me."

"Oh, Khriss… I'm sorry," Kenton replied, not certain what else to say. Instead, he simply held her tightly, wishing somehow that he could lend her some of his strength, wishing he could do something

to take some of her pain upon himself.

She didn't cry. She just let him hold her, her eyes staring almost blankly to the side. Eventually, her shaking slackened, and she took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to pile all of this on top of you. I thought I was over it before I got here. I just want to ask you a question."

Kenton smiled. "Why am I not surprised?" he said.

She looked up, smiling as she met his eyes, though she did not pull away. Then her smile faded, however. "Is it true?" she asked. "Does sand have to recharge in the sun after you use it."

Kenton paused, then he nodded. "Yes," he said. "It takes about three or four hours."

Khriss sighed, resting her head back against his chest. "I have a confession," she mumbled. "There was more than curiosity behind my trying to find out how sand mastery worked."

"What do you mean?" Kenton asked.

"I wanted to take sand mastery back to Elis," she explained. "I wanted to use it against the Dynasty to protect my people."

"But…" Kenton said with a frown, "sand mastery won't work on darkside."

"Well, I know that now," Khriss said. "But I didn't before. Someone refused to tell me anything."

"I'm sorry," Kenton explained. "But I have to be secretive. Otherwise people might take sand mastery and use it as a weapon of war."

Khriss stiffed slightly.

"It's all right," he soothed, rubbing his hand across her back. "Your goals were noble, Khrissalla. Fortunately, or unfortunately, the laws of sand mastery have contrived to make them unattainable. You can't have sand masters on darkside, so it doesn't matter anyway."

Khriss nodded, looking up at him again. Her dusky, darksider eyes were wide, so deep and so open. Her body was pressed close to his own, her arms around his waist.

"My Lady!" Cynder's voice suddenly exclaimed. "Are you all right?"

Kenton turned, seeing the lanky darkside linguist standing in the

doorway, the massive Baon behind him.

Khriss blushed, releasing him as she submitted to the elderly professor's inspection. He looked her over, frowning. "What happened?" he demanded, satisfied that she wasn't injured. "Baon said you sent him to get me, but that Divine-cursed lunk has told me almost nothing. Acron is…"

"Dead," Khriss finished.

"What?" Kenton said with surprise.

"He was an assassin," Baon explained. "One of Scythe's personal elite. He was sent to find and eliminate Prince Gevalden."

Kenton blinked in surprise. "Acron?" he asked. "The fat one?"

Baon nodded, completely serious.

"This is going to take some explaining," Kenton guessed. "Let's sit."

The four made their way over to the room's plush chairs, seating themselves. Even Baon did so, though the warrior usually insisted on standing.

"Nice to see you're back, by the way," Kenton noted to the large man.

"I was never gone," Baon replied. "Despite what others might have assumed."

Khriss blushed slightly. "You did mislead us," she challenged.

Kenton looked between them, confused.

"Baon was sent by the Dynasty to investigate sand mastery," Khriss explained. Kenton could tell by the look on her face that she wasn't quite certain what she thought of that news.

"But I was also sent by Elis to protect her," Baon said. "I can do both."

"You are striding atop a very thin wall, my friend," Kenton noted. "Loyalty is a difficult thing to divide."

"I know," Baon said simply.

The statement was met by an incredulous sound. Cynder, chuckling softly to himself.

"What?" Khriss asked.

"I was just thinking," the linguist said ruefully. "All this time, I assumed I had the superior intellect between Acron and I. Now it seems that my self-assurance was misplaced. Gravely misplaced."

He shook his head, laughing again, but there was a haunted look

in his eyes.

"What about Captain Deral?" Khriss asked, turning back to Baon. "You really did kill him?"

Baon nodded. "Deral was a fool. He was planning to sell you to a Dynastic border patrol. He would have ruined the expedition—both yours and mine."

"Sell me?" Khriss asked with amazement. "Shella! Was there anyone on this cursed expedition that didn't have an ulterior motive?"

Cynder chuckled. "It appears that we were the only ones, My Lady. I'm beginning to feel left out."

Baon shrugged. "I shouldn't have taken the pistols. I never thought you would notice."

"I wouldn't have," Khriss said. "If you hadn't taught me to do so."

Baon smiled slightly. "All right then, duchess. What now? You've found your Prince; you know that sand mastery won't help Elis. Do we return?"

Khriss paused, shooting a look at Kenton—a look that seemed to remember their embrace a few moments before.

A fluke? Kenton wondered. *She was distraught, after all. Maybe she was just projecting her emotions on me.*

"No," she finally said. "We'll stay a few more days. I'm very… interested to see what will happen with the Diem."

Kenton smiled. "Me too," he admitted. *You fool, he told himself ruefully. You know how it is going to end. Even if you do save the Diem, you won't live to see your victory. You have no right to play with the girl's emotions. She's just lost one love, she doesn't need to start forming a bond with you, only to have it severed in four day's time.*

But, still, he could hope. For some reason, it seemed like the incentive for surviving the fight with Drile had just grown much stronger.

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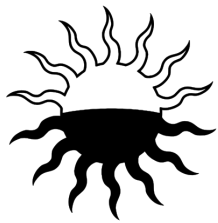

How did he find out? Ais wondered with frustration, staring down at his reports. Nilto was slipping away from him. All over Kezare the man was pulling out of businesses, shutting down operations, and quietly silencing those who could have spoken of him. Ais only had fractured reports and unrelated comments, but to him they formed a distinct pattern—one he had seen before. Sharezan was preparing to go into hiding. Ais had gotten too close this time, and now the man was preparing to run.

Ais felt all of his work, his efforts, his years of hunting, drying away like water in the sun. If he didn't catch Sharezan in the next few days, then he would have to start all over. The man would remain in hiding for a year or so, then return under a different persona to rule Kezare again.

The man who had wanted to speak with Ais, whoever he was, would be gone by now. He was either dead or in hiding. And, now that Sharezan was preparing to disappear, he would make certain that there was no one around to connect him to Nilto. It was all lost.

"He certainly is having a good time, isn't he?" The Lord Mastrell's voice was subdued. He stood in one of his favored spots, leaning thoughtfully against his balcony's banister.

Seeing Kenton brightened Ais's mood slightly. If there were a

person who was in a worse mood than Ais, it was the Lord Mastrell. He only had four days left, and he still lacked several important votes. In addition, the fight with the other sand master—Drile—would probably prove to be his execution. Kenton's position was worse than Ais's—at least Ais's failure would probably mean that his family was safe again.

Kenton was staring across the courtyard to where Drile made his rooms. The other sand master was throwing some sort of party. Ais could see forms moving and mingling in the room—it wasn't a formal party, like a *kelzi* would have. Wine was flowing freely, even though sand masters weren't supposed to drink. Women had been brought to the room, and Drile's supporters were enjoying a period of loose debauchery.

This is what sand masters are supposed to be, Ais thought to himself. *Arrogant, wasteful, and sickening. Kenton is a fluke. Just because he appears to be an honest man does not mean that the Diem itself should continue. He would be better off outside of the Diem, actually. Perhaps he would give up this sand master foolishness. We could use his sense of dedication in the Hall.*

"I wonder where he got the money," Kenton mused. "He probably found the stash in his room—we didn't search his."

"Maybe I'm on the wrong side," Eric said, opening Kenton's door and walking into the room. "That party looks like a lot of fun."

Kenton snorted, turning. "Did you sleep well?"

"Of course," Eric informed, munching on some *ZaiDon* snaps in a small bag. "Unlike some other people, I didn't stay up late yesterday."

Ais shook his head. Apparently, the darksider Khriss had come to visit Kenton the day before. Ais had heard the news with trepidation, hoping he hadn't missed anything he should report to the Lady Judge. Eric, however, had seemed personally offended that they hadn't woken him to take part.

"You know," Eric said, still chewing on some snaps, "I'm not even certain I want to tell you what I discovered today."

Kenton perked up. "What?"

"It's all over town," Eric continued with a leisurely voice. "Of course, no one would probably tell a sand master—everyone's too in awe of your magnificent powers. They think you—"

“Eric,” Kenton interrupted. “News?”

“You know,” Eric said with a quiet snort, “you’re a lot less fun now that you’re in charge.” He held up a hand to forestall further objections. “All right. The Lord Merchant and the Lord General are missing. People say fled the city together to avoid casting votes at the Council in four days.”

“*Aisha!*” Kenton swore. “Gone? They can’t do that!” He shot a look at Ais.

Ais frowned, considering the Law. His own studies had focused on the day-to-day mechanics of lawbreaking, not the intricacies of the Council and Taishin. However, everyone trained in the Hall—whether they be judge, scribe, or trackt—was required to have at least a basic understanding legal intent.

“I think they can, *Ry’Kensha*,” Ais said. “The Lady Judge called for a vote of unimity. An abstained vote because of truancy wouldn’t be an against vote, but it also wouldn’t be a vote in favor. Therefore, it would flaw a unanimous vote. All of the Taisha have to be in attendance if you want to win this vote.”

Kenton cursed again, beginning to pace on his sand-covered floor. “I can understand Vey,” he finally said. “He was incredibly nervous when he thought that I had discovered his secret. Running from the problem seems like something he would do. But Reegent? I thought his vote was secure.”

“Maybe he changed his mind,” Eric offered. “Of course, that doesn’t sound much like father, does it?”

Kenton shook his head. “If he had changed his mind, he would have confronted me. Running away to avoid voting isn’t his way. Of course, I didn’t even know he was back from the hunt.”

“He got back a few days ago,” Eric said. “He’s just been staying in the Tower recovering from his wounds. I went to see him two days ago. He still seemed in favor of you then—as much as he seemed displeased with me, in fact.”

Kenton shook his head, continuing to pace, his bright white sandcloak billowing behind him. “I trust Reegent,” he decided. “Wherever he went, he’ll be back for the vote. Unless.… the rumors say he went with Vey, right?”

“That’s what they say,” Eric agreed.

“Maybe they didn’t go together,” Kenton guessed. “Maybe he

went after Vey, to bring him back."

"Makes sense," Eric agreed.

"But," Kenton said, still pacing, "Where did Vey go?"

"I don't know," Eric said with a shrug, popping the last snap into his mouth. He sucked on it instead of chewing, letting the carapace *ZaiDon* melt away as he spoke. "No one knows where he went. The Lord Merchant chartered a ship late yesterday, and it set sail within an hour, heading south."

"It appears that your vote has just been sabotaged," Ais noted. It was a fortunate turn of events—he had almost begun to fear that Kenton would actually get all seven votes. However, the Sand Lord had a way of making things turn out as they should.

Kenton looked up, determination in his eyes. "Not if I find them and drag them back," he informed.

"But we don't know where they are!" Eric objected.

"We'll find out."

Khriss sat down in the small boat beside Baon and Cynder. N'Teese stood on the dock for a moment, regarding the small vessel with a frown. She shared the typical daysider hydrophobia. It was almost like the people tried to ignore the fact that they were living on an island. Khriss had often wondered how such a people had come to settle Kezare in the first place.

A couple of them probably got shipwrecked here, she decided with a smile, *and were frightened to cross over to the shore, so they just stayed.*

Eventually, N'Teese climbed into the boat, gripping the side with white-knuckled fingers. The boatman pushed off a second later and began to row them toward the shore.

The trip was becoming increasingly familiar to Khriss. In fact, the boatmen were coming to recognize her—she didn't even have to tell them where she wanted to go anymore. They just immediately began rowing her in the direction of the Diem.

As they moved, Khriss remembered with embarrassment her meeting with Kenton the night before. Such had hardly been appropriate behavior for a noblewoman, let alone a duchess. Not only had she visited the home of a single man, but she had done it during normal sleeping hours, and she had gone alone. Then she had thrown herself at him shamelessly, getting improperly close.

What he must think of her…

Of course, she had been distraught. Despite the strong front she had shown to Gevin, his words had devastated her. Even now, she could feel the open wounds in her heart. Nothing—not even Baon's betrayal—had hit her as hard as Gevin's loathing confessions. She felt worthless. She hated Gevin, but she hated herself even more. Why hadn't she seen it? Why had she assumed that someone as perfect as Gevin would ever be satisfied with someone like her?

Kenton wouldn't want her either—or, at least, he shouldn't. He had been nice the day before, but she hadn't given him much choice, launching herself into his arms like an infatuated child. What had she been thinking? After Gevin's retreat, her first impulse had been to go find Kenton. Baon had suggested they return to darksider town, but she had ignored him, insisting that she got to the Diem instead. She had barely had the presence of mind to send him after Cynder.

And here she was again, travelling across the lake toward the Diem. Off to bother Kenton again. When would she learn? He was learning to be more political—he no longer gave her sour looks whenever she appeared, but she knew she still annoyed him. After all, she had annoyed Gevin. All of her endless questions and dissatisfaction—why couldn't she remain silent? Unheard, as a proper lady was supposed to be?

She just about told N'Teese to order the boatman to turn back. At that moment she noticed something—another boat on the lake. It was only one of many, but it was heading in the opposite direction of Khriss's. There were several forms on board—one in white, another in black, and one in bright darkside colors.

Khriss yelped, ducking down.

Baon raised an eyebrow. "What are you doing?"

"He'll see me," she said lamely.

"Yes, I thought that was the point. We are going to see him, aren't we?"

"I changed my mind," Khriss said, embarrassed. "He doesn't want me around."

Baon frowned. "Well, too late," he noted.

"What do you—" Khriss began.

A moment later the boat rocked violently as an occupant landed

directly in its center, falling from the sky on a line of shimmering sand. N'Teese squealed in fear at the rocking, and the boatman began to mumble in dissatisfied Lossandin.

Kenton looked down at her, a confused look on his face. "Khriss?" he asked.

"Yes?" she replied, feeling silly.

"What…" he said, then just shook his head. "Never mind. We have a problem."

"What?" Khriss asked, sitting back up with as much decency as she could manage.

"Two of the Taisha have disappeared," he explained. "Apparently, my threats frightened Vey to the point that he ran away. And, for some reason, he convinced the Lord General to go with him. We've got to find out where they went."

"How do we do that?"

"I think I know someone who can tell us."

It didn't look like a farmer's home. Located on the *kelzin* island, the Lord Farmer's house was lavish and tasteful. True, it did bear the symbol of the Field on its gates—a stalk of grain—but the grounds were covered with imported sand and blooming sandflowers.

"This is where the Lord Farmer lives?" Khriss asked with a frown.

"He's not a farmer himself," Kenton explained. "He's a *kelzi*, very similar to the Lord Merchant. The Field is starkly divided between those who own the land and those who simply work it."

"A common system," Cynder noted. "Those who work the land rarely own what they produce."

"Oh, they own it," Kenton corrected. "They have to give a percentage to the *kelzin*, but they are the ones who actually own the crops. Quite a few industrious farmers have been able to rise to *kelzi* status through their work. In fact, it's supposed to be the best Profession if one wants to try to become a *kelzi*."

Khriss frowns. "But, who determines who is a *kelzi* and who isn't."

"It all depends on who the other *kelzin* acknowledge," Kenton said with a shrug.

"That seems ambiguous," Khriss objected.

Cynder chuckled beside her. "Not if you think about it, My Lady.

After all, isn't that really how our system works? What would a title be without the rest of court to acknowledge it? It's all a matter of connotation."

"All right," Khriss asked. "So why are we here?"

Kenton pushed open the gate. Like the Lord Admiral, the Lord Farmer held meetings at his home, rather than an office. Most of his Profession members lived a great distance away, and so he wasn't as busy as people like the Lord Merchant or Lady Judge.

"Gennel is Vey's underling," Kenton explained. "Even though they're both Taishin, they're also both Kershtian, and Gennel is younger. He tries desperately to earn Vey's favor, and the two meet together often. If anyone in town knows where the Lord Merchant is hiding, it will be the Lord Farmer."

Kenton led the group up to the house, taking a slight detour to avoid a large bulbous sandling that was standing on the walkway grazing. The front door was open—in fact, there wasn't a front door. The entire house was built with an open-aired sort of feel, almost more like a stone pavilion than a building. There were wide columns and built-up chambers, but all of the rooms had broad openings in the walls. It was rather unique, though Kenton wondered if the man ever felt like he lacked privacy. Of course, here on the *kelzi* island, his nearest neighbor was far enough away that they probably wouldn't be able to see details anyway.

An attendant beside the building's front columns looked up as Kenton approached. As soon as he saw who was coming he started, jaw dropping slightly. Then he jumped to his feet, dashing into the building, disappearing before Kenton even got to his bench.

"We can't take you with us anywhere, can we?" Eric noted. "Maybe we should put a bag over your head so you stop frightening everyone away."

Kenton snorted. "It's the sash, not my face," he said, folding his arms as he waited. Should they go in after the man? His internal question was answered as the attendant reappeared a few moments later.

"Um, the Lord Farmer isn't here right now," the attendant explained weakly.

Kenton sighed. "I don't have time for this," he mumbled, reaching to his sand pouch. A moment later three ribbons of sand

flashed to life, streaking across the room to grab the attendant. The man whimpered slightly as Kenton lifted him into the air and floated him over until he was hanging right in front of Kenton.

"Where is he?" Kenton asked simply.

The man pointed a quivering finger at a side room.

"Thank you," Kenton said, lowering the man to the ground a few feet away.

"Good job," Eric approved in Dynastic. "That is definitely going to encourage people not to be scared of you."

Kenton ignored him, walking forward and striding through the chamber's open front. Inside he found a room decorated after Kershtian fashion, with sand-filled cushions and rugs woven from *ShalRim* fibers. There were sheets hanging from the open windows, flapping like the sides of a tent. The Lord Farmer sat nervously on a cushion at the back of the room.

Gennel was tall for a Kershtian, almost as tall as Kenton himself. However, he was thin to the point of gangliness, a fact that his robes tried unsuccessfully to hide. He regarded Kenton with a tense face.

"My Lord Mastrell!" he exclaimed. "Why, what a surprise!"

"Hello, Lord Farmer," Kenton said with a nod of his head.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"Where did Vey go?" Kenton asked simply.

"I don't know. He didn't—" Gennel yelped as Kenton's sand moved forward threateningly. He began to speak very quickly, his Kershtian accent making the words almost indistinguishable. "He made me promise not to tell. Please don't make me tell. I don't want to be part of this. Oh Sand Lord, protect me. Vey will be very angry if I tell. Can't you ask someone else? Oh, please don't kill me!"

Kenton blinked in surprise, looking down at his ribbons. Gennel whimpered, cowering on the floor, pulling a cushion over his head.

This isn't right, Kenton thought, lowering his hand, feeling sick. He regarded his sand, hovering in the air before him. To him it was beautiful. He couldn't imagine the fear that others felt. They should see it as he did, see it for its use and its wonderful versatility, not regard it as mysterious and frightening.

I can't use sand mastery like this. This is exactly the sort of

thing that got us into trouble in the first place.

He let his sand die. “I won’t force you,” he said simply.

Gennel looked up with surprised eyes. “What?” he asked. “You won’t?”

Kenton shook his head. “I will ask, however. For the good of Lossand, Lord Farmer, please tell me where Vey is. I just want to talk to him.”

Gennel shot a look at the blackened sand scattered across his rug. “Um, I can’t tell you,” he said weakly, then immediately began cringing again.

“Fine,” Kenton said with a sigh. He would find another way.

Khriss watched the exchange with dissatisfaction, listening to N’Teese’s translation. *He’s not going to do it,* she realized. In a way, it was noble—he wanted to do what was right. However, he obviously didn’t understand politics. It was vital that he find out where the Lord Merchant had gone. He couldn’t afford to be merciful right now—he needed every advantage he could get.

N’Teese sighed as they turned to leave. “Why did we even come?” she complained. “He knew that Gennel wouldn’t tell him unless he forced him to talk.”

“Hush,” Khriss ordered. Even if the girl was repeating Khriss’s own thoughts, it wasn’t proper to say such things.

He needs my help, she decided. “Kenton, where are you going now?”

“Back to the Diem, I suppose,” he said with a sigh. “I need to think.”

“Then, I have some things I need to take care of,” she said. “I’ll come by later.”

“All right,” he said distractedly. Khriss nodded to Baon and Cynder moving off to the side.

“N’Teese, we need to find the Lord Beggar again.”

The girl raised her eyes in exasperation, but she did lead then toward the poor section of the city.

Khriss didn’t know what to think, looking on Gevin again. He squatted beside a group of beggars, his twisted face pointed away from her. This was the man she had loved—or thought she loved—for most of her life. This was the man that had rejected her so completely just a day before.

At first sight of him, a sickness rose within her. Never had anyone rejected her so soundly. The man she had called her betrothed for most of her life had been cheating on her all the while. Cheating on her because he found her annoying.

Khriss took a deep breath, stilling her churning stomach. She had to see him once more. Kenton needed her help.

Well, at least he finally told me the truth, she admitted as she approached. *For that much, I can be grateful. I could have gone on thinking that he had always loved me, never knowing the truth of my own repulsiveness.* A small part of her, however, wondered if that wouldn't have been the better way.

"Gevin?" she said.

Gevin jumped, turning with a scowl on his face. "Don't call me that," he spat in Dynastic. "Do you want the entire Dynasty to come searching me out?"

Khriss smiled slightly, getting an idea. "Why should I care?" she asked. "You should prepare yourself, Gevin. As soon as I return to Elis, my first objective is to tell your parents precisely where you are and what you are doing."

Gevin hissed. "You are fool, woman. You really do want me dead, don't you?"

"Why should I care what happens to you?" Khriss snapped.

"You should care what happens to yourself, dear duchess," Gevin whispered. "There is one sure way to make certain you remain quiet."

Khriss paused. "You wouldn't dare," she guessed.

Gevin just raised an eyebrow.

"Go ahead, Gevin," she continued, a little less certain of herself. "Threaten me. You haven't given me any other incentive to stay quiet."

Gevin paused, then turned back to shoo away his beggar comrades. "What are you implying?" he asked as he scuffled toward Khriss.

"I have a question I want answered," Khriss said, her confidence returning. "Bring me the information I want, and I'll promise you my silence."

Gevin ground his teeth for a moment. "What's the question?" he asked.

“I need to know where the Lord Merchant is hiding.”

Gevin snorted. “I don’t know that,” he said. “I’ve been trying all day to figure it out.”

“The Lord Farmer knows,” Khriss said.

“And how am I supposed to get him to tell me?” Gevin asked with a frown.

“I don’t care,” Khriss said coldly. “That is your problem—I just want the information. You have one dayside hour to find it for me.”

“One hour!” Gevin snapped. “That’s impossible.”

“Then you’d better get moving,” Khriss suggested. “I don’t have much time, Gevin. A friend of mine is under a very strict deadline.”

Gevin continued to frown, ignoring the spittle on the side of his lip. Khriss stood with concern. Had she pushed too hard? Would he actually decide that killing her was easier? This was Gevin—he couldn’t be that heartless, could he?

Finally, Gevin snorted and shook his head. “I’ll do it, Khrissalla, if only to get you out of my face for good. It’s funny. You’re so much more involved with politics now that you’ve left your homeland behind.”

“I guess I just don’t have anyone holding me back any more,” Khriss shot back. “Now get moving.”

For a man with so much to do, I certainly do spend a lot of time in my room, Kenton thought with disdain, continuing to pace.

He was in trouble, and he knew it. He couldn’t think of anyone else who would know where the Lord Merchant was going. He’d hoped the man would be foolish enough to leave record of his trip, but Kenton had stopped by to see the Kezare Dockmaster before returning to the Diem. The man had explained that Vey had chartered an entire ship rather than simply buying passage aboard one with a set destination. He hadn’t told anyone where he intended to go, he had simply set off south.

Vey could be anywhere. South of Kezare, Lossand was nearly one solid city running along the river. There were dozens of towns of moderate size, all depending on the river for sustenance. Kenton could search for weeks and never find the missing Taishin. All Vey had to do was hide four for short days, and Kenton’s cause would be lost.

Kenton continued to pace, kicking up sand in frustration. The

party across the courtyard had slowed, and several of Drile's guests were stumbling down the staircase. Several more had collapsed near the balcony, unconscious on the floor.

Well, at least one good thing will come from this. That man won't be Lord Mastrell. However, Kenton knew the thought was a fallacy—true, Drile wouldn't be Lord Mastrell. He would be something worse: a mercenary lord who used sand mastery to subjugate the people of dayside.

"Sands!" Kenton hissed out loud, continuing his pacing with a vengeful step. He could have handled loosing to contrary votes, but to loose because of abstained votes? He was impotent—he couldn't do a single thing to forestall his doom.

The door slammed open suddenly. "I've got it!" Khriss announced to the surprised room. "He's hiding in Lraezare, wherever that is."

"What?" Kenton blinked, staring at her eager face with surprise. "I mean, how?"

Khriss smiled cryptically. "I have my sources," she explained. "I am, after all, a master politician."

"Lraezare," Kenton said. Vey had run as far as he possibly could and still be in Lossand.

"A three day round trip," Eric mused. "I suppose we could make it. It'd be close, though."

"Let's get moving, then!" Kenton said enthusiastically, rushing from the room.

The Kezare Dockmaster was a strong Kershtian man of thick build with an expression that said 'whatever you want, it isn't worth my time.' He was a busy man, always running across the docks, yelling orders and organizing his unloaders. However, he was easy to find, because his bellowing voice carried even over the riotous sounds of the crowd. He wore simple robes with the Helm's symbol, a steering wheel, on its breast.

Kenton approached the man for the second time in one day. This time, however, he was more confident—he wasn't looking for information, only a ride. The dockman saw him coming and growled in annoyance. He screamed one last order at a line of men who were carrying carapace boxes up onto a broad-bottomed ship.

"You again?" the man said with dissatisfaction. "I told you, I

don't know where he is."

"That's all right," Kenton said with a smile. "Fortunately, I do. I need passage on a ship to Lraezare."

"Sorry," the Dockmaster said immediately. "There aren't any places available."

"What?" Kenton snorted. "Dozens of ships leave this dock every day. You're telling me none of them are travelling to Lraezare? It's one of the largest ports south of Kezare!"

"No," the man snapped. "I didn't say there weren't any ships going to Lraezare. I said there aren't any that have room for you."

"But, don't you need to check your ledgers to know that?" Kenton challenged.

"No," the man said again. "I already did. Earlier, when Vey spoke with me."

Kenton paused. The Dockmaster had called a Lord Taisha by his given name, with no title affixed. Surely no one would dare such an affront, especially not a Kershtian. Unless…

"You wouldn't be related to the Lord Merchant, would you?" Kenton asked.

The Dockmaster smiled. "He's my uncle," he said with an evil glint in his eye.

Kenton cursed to himself. "Fine," he said. "I'll contact the separate captains and see if any of them can make room for me."

"You can't do that," the Dockmaster warned. "It's against the Law—all passengers must be taxed as proper. You have to go through me if you want to ride on anything bigger than a ferry to the shore."

"All right," Kenton shot back, "then I'll charter a ship."

"You're welcome to do so," the man said with a shrug, snapping an order at a slacking dockworker. "Assuming you can afford one, of course. As I recall, mastrells can't commandeer ships."

Kenton froze, then cursed again. The Diem barely had a few hundred lak left in its stores—he had spend most of their remaining coin buying food. There was some sort of carapace shortage to the east—apparently, a disease had struck the sandling herds. *ZaiDon* prices had been going up steadily over the last few weeks.

The Dockmaster smiled again, then turned away from Kenton, rushing over to yell at a group of dockmen who had accidentally

dropped a large box, cracking it and spilling grain onto the ground.

"Vey covers his tracks well," Eric noted. "He probably didn't trust the Lord Farmer to keep quiet. I suppose we could swim there."

Kenton ignored him, thinking quickly. They could commandeer some rezalin—the sandlings moved as quickly as a boat. Unfortunately, a lot of their speed was hampered in Lossand, where they didn't have dunes to jump on. In addition, their feet were curved for pushing against sand—running across rock could cause them permanent damage.

He could use a smaller boat, a ferry or the like. However, without sails and oars, he doubted they would make the trip in time—especially when they had to come back up stream.

"Why, hello, Lord Mastrell," a slurred voice said. "What an odd place to find you."

Kenton turned with surprise to find Delious in a bright pink robe moving through the crowd behind him. The same young man that always followed Delious—his wine steward—stood beside him like usual, holding a jug of wine. Behind the steward were packmen holding large trunks.

"Lord Admiral…" Kenton said, smiling as he got an idea. "What brings you here?"

"Why, I'm going on a trip," Delious announced. "To the south. I feel a sudden urge to visit the Shipowner's Circle. They're headquartered in Lraezare you know."

Delious smiled, catching Kenton's eye. "Would you like to join me?" he asked. "It seems like it will be a delightful trip."

Kenton looked at Delious, cocking his head slightly to the side. There was no way this was a coincidence. But, how had he known…? Suddenly, he knew that he had seriously underestimated Lord Delious.

"Yes, it does sound delightful," Kenton said. "I would love to join you."

"Wonderful!" Delious exclaimed. He turned lazily, catching the Dockmaster's eye. "Oh, NaiMeer!" he said. "Come over here, please!"

The Dockmaster gritted his teeth, but he did obey. "Yes, Lord Admiral," he said with a poorly disguised sneer.

“I shall need a ship for a few days,” Delious said, looking over those in dock. “Say, that one.” He pointed at a ship that had just finished its unloading procedures. “Warn the captain that we shall be leaving for Lraezare within the hour. The Circle will compensate him for any losses, of course.”

“But—” the Dockmaster began.

“I know, I know,” Delious said. “It isn’t grand enough for me by far, but I’m in a hurry. Please warn the captain so he doesn’t let his crew get scattered through the city.”

The Dockmaster shot a hating look at Kenton, then bowed slightly. “Yes, My Lord,” he said.

“Delightful man,” Delious said, patting him on the head. “Steward, pour him a drink. He looks like he’s been working far too hard.”

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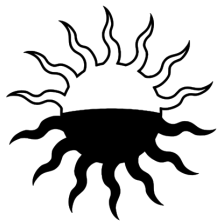

"Lord Mastrell?"

Kenton looked up to find Elorin regarding him with a confused look. The old sand master looked wearied for some reason, his white robes hanging limply on his body, his eyes reddened from lack of sleep.

Of course, Kenton thought with a smile, *I probably look just as bad. This has been a hard week for all of us.*

"I have to go, Elorin," he explained.

"Go?" Elorin asked with surprise. "But, you can't. The Diem needs you, My Lord."

"It needs me to go to the south," Kenton said, throwing a few of his newly tailored outfits into a carapace trunk. "The Lords Merchant and General have fled to Lraezare. If I don't get there and persuade them to come up for the next Council, then we'll lose their votes by default."

Kenton closed the trunk, then stood, turning to place his hand on Elorin's shoulder. The old sand master had returned to help, but during the last week and a half he had shown little of the efficiency that had made him such an excellent Lord Mastrell's assistant. The specter of his lost abilities haunted the old man. He barely did anything anymore, floating through the Diem's halls like windblown sand. He occasionally visited Kenton, but his personality

was even more subdued than it had been before. The poor man wasn't dealing well with his losses.

"I have a request for you, old friend," Kenton said.

Elorin looked up, his tired eyes meeting Kenton's. "Yes, Lord Mastrell?"

"Watch the Diem for me while I'm gone. You're the only one here I trust with such a duty, now that Dirin is gone."

"I shall… try, My Lord," the man said quietly.

Kenton patted him on the shoulder, then reached out and threw a ribbon of sand at his trunk. The container floated into the air, following Kenton out of the room as he headed toward the docks.

Elorin watched him go, his eyes looking even more burdened than before.

When Kenton arrived back at the ship, a disheveled Khriss was supervising the dockmen who were carrying three enormous trunks onto the boat. She had reacted to the trip with anxiety, claiming she would never have enough time to get ready. Such had obviously been an exaggeration—after all, she had beat Kenton back to the ship.

"Those can't all be yours," Kenton chided. "You only had a tonk's worth two weeks ago."

Khriss blushed. "I've made some purchases since then," she defended. "A lady has to be properly outfitted."

"Well, I suppose you're making the local merchants happy," Kenton said with a shrug, whipping his own sand-born trunk toward the deck. "Come on."

He offered her his arm, then the two of them followed the dockmen up the plank and onto deck. There they found Delious lounging in a deck chair waiting for them, his steward standing attentively behind him. The elderly Cynder, wearing one of his customary darkside suits, relaxed in a chair beside the Lord Admiral, a cup of wine in his hands.

"Are we finally ready?" Delious asked.

"I suppose. Is everyone here?"

"The bodyguard and the Lord General's boy are talking back there," Delious said, nodding toward the ship's aft. "In the back part of the ship—I can never remember what it's called. That impossibly bad tempered trackt is down below, stowing his things. The good

professor here has been teaching me to speak darksider. Listen," Delious proffered his cup, speaking in a loud voice, "have some swine!" he said enthusiastically in Dynastic.

Cynder shrugged, chuckling. "Close enough, I suppose."

Kenton, however, was regarding the glint in the drunken Taisha's eyes. Delious was smiling slightly as he raised his cup to his lips—he knew exactly what he had said. At that moment Delious shot him a look that was so startlingly lucid that Kenton almost jumped in surprise.

Sands… he's drunk, but he's not. I was wrong about this man. At the Lord Admiral's party, Kenton had assumed the slight edge of wit he had sensed in the man was only a broken remnant from what he had once been. Now Kenton was beginning to rescind that supposition.

Is the drunkenness an act? But, no, his cheeks are red, his voice slurred, and he's definitely drinking that wine. It's no act.

Delious ordered for the departure procedures to go forth, and Kenton moved over, taking a seat in one of the chairs that were attached to the deck. Delious gestured a foppish arm, offering Kenton a drink, but Kenton shook his head. He couldn't make sense of this man.

Regardless, he had something he had been planning to try. Now that he was on the ship, he was probably relatively safe from assassins. He finally had a chance to do something he had considering for some time. If he didn't do it now, he would lose the opportunity.

He reached into his sand pouch, pulling out a handful of sand.

"What are you doing?" Khriss asked.

Kenton regarded the sand for a moment, its bright whiteness glowing in the sunlight. It hid a power that had to be unlocked. Was Kenton the same way? Did he have further power inside him, power that he could harness somehow?

"I'm going to overmaster," he finally decided.

"What?" Khriss asked with concern. "What's that?"

"It means I'm going to intentionally hold sand longer than I should, draining the water from my body."

"Draining the…" Khriss said with a frown. She didn't push the issue, however. Instead she simply said, "won't that be dangerous?"

“Probably,” Kenton admitted. “But it’s the only thing I can think of,” he explained. “When you first found me nearly dead in the *kerla*, I was sick primarily because I had overmastered. But, before that happened, I could only control one ribbon. After I recovered, I could master three.”

“But, what if that’s just a parallel syllogism?” Khriss demanded.

Kenton raised his eyebrows, chuckling slightly. “A what? I thought we were speaking Dynastic.”

Khriss blushed. “What if the overmastery and your gaining powers happened at the same time, but are completely unrelated?”

“I have to take that chance,” Kenton decided. “Khriss, I can’t defeat Drile with only three ribbons. He can control twenty-five—he’ll kill me in a matter of seconds. If I don’t find some way to boost my ability, then my bones will be drying in the sun before this week is over.” He looked up, meeting her eyes. “I keep finding more reasons to survive.”

Khriss looked at him with worried eyes. “But, last time…” Khriss said, obviously remembering the state he had been in when she found him. “It could be deadly,” she assumed.

“The mastrells always taught that it was,” Kenton agreed. “According to them, even if you did survive, you were supposed to lose your powers.” Suddenly, he remembered chilling image of Elorin, the old undermastrell’s eyes pained, bearing an incredible torment that Kenton vaguely remembered. Apparently, some of what the mastrells had said was true. It was possible to lose one’s powers through overmastery. Kenton had almost lost his powers once—could he voluntarily do the same thing to himself again?

Then, however, another image appeared in his mind. Drile, rising into the air, two dozen ribbons of sand whipping around him like writhing souls of the damned. Three ribbons couldn’t possibly stand against such power. He had to do something.

He held out his fist, and called the sand to life. It flashed with inner power, the individual grains of sand dancing into the air, as if joyous to finally release their stored energy. Two other ribbons followed, and he loaded all three with as much sand as he could manage.

Khriss, Delious, and Cynder watched him with transfixed eyes. Mastered sand was a captivating sight, its colors shifting and

swirling, sometimes forming patterns, sometimes sparkling like a thousand different individual shows. Even with three ribbons it took a while before Kenton began to feel the effects. A mastrell mastering at full power could go as long as ten minutes without overmastering, and Kenton could only control three. Before, with one, he had been able to last over a half hour—assuming he wasn't doing anything else strenuous to drain his water.

This time it took about twenty minutes. First his skin began to dry. Without sweat to cool his body, he began to overheat. It was as if the sun itself had crawled in his chest, burning away at his blood. His eyes and mouth were next, his eyes beginning to burn, his mouth growing dry, his tongue feeling like a lifeless lump.

He began to shake, his body craving water. Yet, he forced himself on, mastering beyond what he had ever dared. The desire to let go became unbearable, and he felt himself compulsively reaching for his *qido*. Once, his claw like fingers almost got the lid off, but he managed to force himself to put it back down.

He could barely see now. He had to struggle too direct his water usage, keeping the sand mastery from draining his eyes or his brain. The pain was incredible.

They needn't have warned us about this, he thought, feeling himself begin to slump in his chair. *Who would sanely attempt something so painful? All of the mastrells' reinforcement, all of their care to make certain we don't overmaster, it must have been to hide the truth of overmastery. It must have been…*

Khriss cried out as she saw Kenton slump out of his chair and fall to the deck. Ignoring decorum, she rushed to his side, grabbing him and yelling for him to stop. His eyes were closed, he was barely breathing, and his lips were parched as if he had spent days laying in the sun. Yet, his sand continued to hover over his head. She held his limp body close. A second later, his sand dropped to the deck.

At that moment, holding him against her chest, Khriss felt Kenton's heart stop.

Khriss grew cold. "His heart isn't beating!" she cried frantically. She turned around, seeing the confusion in Delious's eyes, the helplessness in Cynder's.

Khriss sat, confused. What was going on? What could they do. "Wake up!" she yelled at Kenton. "Don't die! You can't die. Not

now. Not after….” She felt hysteria rising, barely felt herself shaking Kenton’s body, demanding that he rise.

“My Lady!” Cynder said, leaping to his feet. “What is wrong with you?”

She ignored him, continuing shake Kenton. She slapped his face, pounded on his chest, and felt the tears on her cheeks. Voices were calling all around her.

Suddenly, a weak hand grabbed her own. “I’m sorry for frightening you,” Kenton mumbled. “But would you kindly stop hitting me?”

Khriss blinked, whipping her eyes in surprise. Kenton was coughing quietly, his eyes open slightly. He groaned.

Khriss reached down, grabbing his water bottle and lifting it to his lips. He drank gratefully.

“Kenton, that was the most idiotic thing I have ever seen anyone do,” she informed.

He coughed again, rubbing his chest where she had been pounding. “I believe you,” he mumbled, trying to sit up—a difficult endeavor with Khriss in his lap. He shook his head, pouring some of the water into his hand and splashing it into his face. “Well, it looks like this time I won’t have to spend a week unconscious. That’s something at least.”

Yes, but you nearly didn’t wake up at all, Khriss thought, staring at his weakened face. *Shella, Divine, thank you.*

Kenton reached into one of his pouches, pulling out some sand. He stared at it for a moment, then finally shook his head. “Nothing,” he announced. “But, I suppose that was the point. Let’s just hope I get it back before the fight with Drile.”

Khriss looked up, hearing a pair of voices coming their direction. A moment later, Eric and Baon approached. “Yes,” Eric was saying, “but I still think conventional formation tactics are outdated with the advent of muskets. It’s like your armies haven’t realized what they have—they tend to employ their rifleman like archers. The thing is, they aren’t the same at all. A rifle isn’t just a more damaging bow that doesn’t shoot as fast, it’s an entirely new concept. Now, everyone in the entire army can be a ranged warrior. Do you understand—” Eric trailed off, seeing Khriss and Kenton. He raised an eyebrow.

“You know, there’s a cabin below decks if you two want to be alone,” he noted.

Khriss blushed, realizing that she was still sitting in Kenton’s lap. She hurried to her feet, straightening her robe. Kenton coughed again, climbing into his chair with more difficulty.

Baon looked at Kenton with keen eyes. “An attack?” he guessed uncertainly.

Kenton shook his head. “It’s complicated,” he said, resting back with a sigh.

He felt naked. Without his sand to protect him, he was like a child away from his parent… a child wandering across deep sand. As long as he had sand mastery, he felt he could defeat anyone. Now, however, he realized just how powerless a person could feel.

How does the rest of the world do it? He wondered. *How do they survive without sand?* It was like having both of his arms severed. He kept reaching for his sand to do things—to grab something for him, or to lift him to the foredeck.

With a sigh, he relaxed in the chair, forcing himself to deal with the situation. He had caused it, after all. The riverside cities of Lossand scrolled past on either side. There was barely a break in the line of towns—here, without the water vines to give water, only the *Ali* could provide sustenance.

They had been sailing for several hours now. Khriss was down below, arranging her things—though Kenton didn’t know why it mattered; they would be arriving within a day, then turning around and coming right back. However, he hadn’t said anything.

Something had happened while he had been unconscious. He didn’t know what it was, but he had an illusive memory of something—something he couldn’t describe. A power, or a force. Something that had overcome his entire body. Then he had woken up, the image of Khriss’s face, haloed by the sun, hovering in front of his face. He’d never seen anything so extraordinary.

Of course, then she’d ruined it by hitting him on the chest. He still didn’t understand that part—she said she’d been frightened, that his heart had stopped. The words, however, sounded foolish to Kenton. If his heart stopped, then he was dead. That was, at least in Kenton’s mind, an irreversible event.

“You look too thoughtful, Lord Mastrell,” Delious noted. He was

the only one still sitting on the deck with Kenton. “Have a drink.”

Kenton smiled. “No thank you, My Lord.”

Delious shrugged. “It must be difficult,” the foppish man noted.

“What is that, Lord Delious? Living without wine?”

Delious shook his head. “No, I was referring to your responsibilities. You are in charge of an entire profession. Is that not difficult?”

Kenton nodded silently. “Indeed it is, Lord Admiral.”

Delious raised his crystalline cup, staring at its blood-red confines. The sun shone through the wine, spraying red droplets of light across the deck. “Responsibility,” Delious mumbled. “Fortunately, that is not something I have to deal with.”

Kenton nodded. “I… realize that, Lord Admiral. I have done a little studying about your profession.”

“And found it ridiculous?” Delious assumed.

Kenton nodded. “Somewhat, yes. Honestly, I have trouble understanding the Helm’s Charter. What is the point behind taking away a Taisha’s possessions?”

Delious shrugged, still staring at his wine. “It is a political tool, Lord Mastrell, and nothing else. In the eyes of the Law, everything the Helm owns belongs to me, which is why I can commandeer any ship I want. However, in reality, the Taisha is the means by which the Shipowner’s Circle keeps power over its members. Everyone knows that if they go against the will of the Circle, they could very well end up losing everything. A clever idea, really. Theft by bestowal of a grand honor.”

“And what did you do, if I may ask,” Kenton ventured. “What did you do to deserve such a… grand honor?”

“I was too successful,” Delious said, draining the wine in his cup with a single gulp. “However, in the eyes of one’s peers, success is one of the worst of sins. I wasn’t always a member of the Helm, you know,” he said.

“You weren’t?” Kenton asked.

Delious shook his head. “Many years ago, almost two decades ago, I was a member of the Guild. That was before you were born, I believe?”

Kenton blushed, suddenly reminded of his age. “Probably,” he admitted.

“I was very successful, you know,” Delious said, holding out his cup to be filled again. His eyes were slightly unfocused, as if he were seeing something Kenton could not. Memories from a past long dead. “I was rich enough to challenge the Lord Merchant himself. All I needed was one last deal—twenty-thousand more lak—and I would have taken the position. I probably could have earned it, had I waited. But, with the impatience of relative youth, I set out to become the youngest man to ever hold that Taisha. I found my opportunity. A friend suggested we finance a new mine found in some hills to the southeast. There were claims that there was lakstone there. I put up nearly my entire fortune on the endeavor…”

“And you lost it?” Kenton asked quietly.

Delious shook his head. “It was taken from me. I spent my fortune outfitting the mines, digging for the stone to make coins. Five years passed, slowly draining my funds. In the end, I fell broke, and was forced to sell the mines. One week later, my friend—the one who had told me about the mine—suddenly found lakstone. Coincidentally, he had been the one who purchased my half of the mines from me. So, he became Lord Merchant instead of myself.”

“Vey?” Kenton asked with surprise.

Delious nodded slowly. “I quit the Guild in disgust. From there I went to the Helm and tried to rebuild my career. I proved a competent shipping captain, and within a decade built up a fleet of mercantile ships to rival any on dayside. Unfortunately, in doing so I had paid little attention to the Circle. I wanted no part of them—it had been my partnership in the mines that betrayed me. I wanted nothing to do with others—I wanted to do it on my own. And I did.”

“Then they took it all away,” Kenton said.

Delious nodded again, downing another entire cup of wine. “This world has given me little to believe in, Lord Mastrell. Those I thought were my friends betrayed me. The Profession I assumed would protect me instead ripped away my life and gave me this foolish mockery in exchange. Justice, honor, the Law… all are equally worthless ideals. Life has stripped down and shown me the bones of her soul, and they are not pretty.”

“I’m… sorry,” was all Kenton could say. “No wonder you…”

“Became a sot?” Delious asked. He shrugged drunkenly. “There is little left for me. I wonder—do you know how much a bottle of wine costs?”

Kenton shook his head. “I’ve never even thought about it before,” he admitted.

“Grapes are said to have come from darkside originally,” Delious explained. “They don’t grow well in dayside’s heat—they have to be watered a ridiculous amount and kept in the shade. When they do grow, the grapes themselves are small and rather withered. Add upon that the difficulty of bottling and fermenting… much of what I drink costs upwards of a thousand lak per bottle.”

Kenton gaped in surprise. A thousand lak a bottle? And, with the amount Delious drank…

Delious smiled. “The Charter only gives me three things: a ship when I need it, a house to live in, and whatever I want to eat and drink. They took everything from me, Kenton. Well, I’m going to make them regret that decision. I had hundreds of thousands of lak worth of ships—I intend to make them pay for every last coin.”

The drunkenness, Kenton thought with surprise. *It isn’t to wipe away sorrows. It’s for revenge.*

It was another few hours before Kenton had the strength to move from the deck chair, and then he only stumbled down to his cabin. However, even that little bit of improvement was encouraging. Before, when Khriss had rescued him, he had spend a week delirious after his overmastery. Of course, that time he had been left in the middle of the *kerla* without even enough water to summon a vine.

Still, he felt stronger this time—perhaps he would get his power back in time to fight Drile. He didn’t want to think of what would happen if he didn’t get it back—somehow he doubted Drile would let him back out, even if he had lost his powers. As long as he lived, he was a threat to Drile’s leadership of the sand masters.

He stumbled into the cabin, finding Ais reading from a dark-paged book—a *Ker’reen* text, if Kenton read the symbols on the front correctly. The two of them would be sharing a cabin, as per Ais’s request. Perhaps the trackt thought Kenton would sneak away in the middle of the night.

Ais closed the book. “You’ve lost your powers,” he said simply.

“For a while, at least,” Kenton replied, laying down on his bunk with a sigh.

“That was a foolish move,” Ais said simply, turning back to his book.

Kenton smiled. “I would have thought that you would find it encouraging. For a little while, at least, I’m no longer your *Ry’Kensha*. I’m just a normal man.”

Ais paused. “It doesn’t matter. Your loss of power isn’t a revocation—it was done in the name of gaining even more strength.”

“Very true,” Kenton admitted. “Say, Ais, I’ve been thinking about something.”

“What?” Ais said, not looking up from his book.

“Well, you said that leader of the assassins—the one the A’Kar had appointed to kill me—had misinterpreted the Kershtian Writ, right?”

“He must have,” Ais said. “It wouldn’t be a difficult mistake to make—the words say ‘assassins may attack on every odd day’ but a cursory read might lead one to think they meant ‘assassins have to wait at least one day.’ The misread would be possible.”

“But, not likely for someone who has been studying the Writ all his life,” Kenton assumed.

“Correct,” Ais replied.

“So, what if the leader of the assassins hasn’t been studying the Writ all of his life?”

“He wouldn’t be a very good Kershtian then,” Ais said, continuing to read.

“What if they’re not Kershtian?”

Ais paused, looking up slowly. “That isn’t possible,” he finally said.

“Why not?” Kenton asked. “Didn’t I hear that the A’Kar is letting Lossandin people into the Priest’s *DaiKeen*?”

“Yes, he has made that decision.”

“So, couldn’t he potentially have chosen a Lossander to head the assassination? That would explain how he misinterpreted the Writ—the language barrier could lead to all kinds of mistakes.”

“What are you implying?” Ais asked slowly.

“What if the leader of the assassins is Drile?” Kenton asked. “We

know he worked with the A'Kar to kill the mastrells. Maybe he's been given the duty of finishing what he began."

Ais snorted. "A sand master? I doubt that, *Ry'Kensha*. Even if the A'Kar did choose a Lossandin person, they would have to be a *Ker'reen* believer. The call to destroy an enemy of the Sand Lord is a holy calling."

"Times are different now," Kenton challenged. "The A'Kar is doing odd things, never before seen in Kershtian tradition. He's made a new *DaiKeen*, populating it with men loyal to him that are neither priest nor warrior, but both together. Maybe, to destroy the Diem, he decided to make a deal with what he saw as a lesser evil."

"Maybe," Ais said, not convinced.

"It makes sense," Kenton continued, more to himself than to Ais. "I wondered why Drile stopped bothering me so quickly after I challenged him. Before, he would have had to be worried that his assassins would fail—I would expect that the A'Kar wasn't too pleased that a sand master survived. This way, however, Drile can kill me himself. He doesn't have to worry about the A'Kar's retribution."

"If you say so, *Ry'Kensha*," Ais said, reading again.

"It makes sense," Kenton repeated, closing his weakened eyes. *Drile, this is just one more reason we need to face one another. I'll get back my strength; your fight won't be quite as easy as you think it will be.*

Khriss watched him stumble down toward his cabin. Kenton had the right idea—she was beginning to feel a little bit tired herself. They still had about ten darkside hours left, if her measures were complete. She might as well spend it sleeping.

She was, however, enjoying the transformation she saw in the landscape around her. The further south they went, the less sand and rocks there were, and the more fields she saw. The lands they were passing to the west were the most lively Khriss had seen on dayside. She could see a complex system of canals splitting off the river, providing irrigation to the fields. They looked nearly as productive as darkside plants—though, for some reason, they were all green. It was an odd color for plants.

The further south they went, the lower the sun sank in the sky. The air was becoming cooler—Kenton said he couldn't feel it, but

Khriss could. Her body whispered that she was going in the right direction—that she should keep going until they reached darkside. *Three more days,* she told herself. *This will all be over by then, whatever the result.*

And, she feared that the result would not be favorable. Kenton's weakness frightened her—she had nearly lost him. She didn't have a good record keeping men she cared about lately. The fear she had felt, holding Kenton's body as his heart stopped, only hinted at what was to come. Kenton was so afraid of Drile's power that he had nearly killed himself just for the possibility of a slight increase in power. Both he and Eric tried to keep an optimistic front, but Khriss could sense what they weren't saying. They didn't think Kenton could defeat this other sand master.

No! Khriss thought with despair, leaning against the side of the ship, watching the cool water pass below. *I can't lose him, not another one. But, what can I do?* She was helpless, once again.

"He should never have gotten himself into this," Eric said approaching from the side.

Khriss looked up. The Lossander was staring at the stairs down to the cabins, his eyes concerned.

"The overmastery?" Khriss asked.

"The Taisha, the leadership," Eric said in a quiet, haunted voice. "Responsibility kills. It sucks the soul out of a man and leaves him a poor imitation of what he could have been."

Khriss frowned, staring at Eric. She had never heard such intensity from him before. He was always so laid-back, so unconcerned with everything. This, however, seemed to be a point even he felt strongly about.

"Responsibility?" Khriss asked. "Someone has to take it."

"I just thank the sands that it isn't me," Eric returned, walking over to lean against the wale next to her. He stared out over the river. "Kenton should have been so smart. He could have just left it all behind. Then he wouldn't be in this position."

Khriss shook her head. *No, Eric. I disagree.* She didn't say so out loud, however. She didn't feel like arguing. However, if there was one thing she had learned on this trip, it was that leadership was more than titles and giving orders. It was an act of becoming something greater than what one had been before; it was doing

things for others, things that they could not do themselves. It was a burden, true, but it refined as much as it hurt.

She could look back on what she had been before. She had been more innocent, true—she hadn't been betrayed by friends, lovers, and expectations alike—but that innocence had been traded for strength and understanding. She would not go back, even if she were given the opportunity.

Eric turned eyes toward Kenton's cabin again. "I suppose he'll learn on his own," Eric whispered. "Nothing is worth that—nothing is worth the expectations, the responsibility for other men's deaths, the responsibility to kill so that others do not have to. It destroys a man, unless he escapes. I escaped. Maybe he will."

Then he turned, his eyes passing over Khriss as if she weren't there, and he just wandered toward his own cabin.

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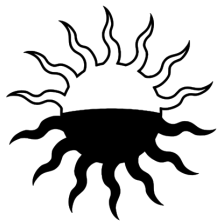

Kenton awoke the next day feeling rejuvenated. He sat up, his body completely devoid of the weakness it had felt before. Eagerly, he reached for the sand pouch beside his cot and commanded the sand to life.

Nothing.

He sighed, dropping the sand back in its pouch. There was a wash basin and a rag beside the cot, and he proceeded to wipe his body down with the scented water, washing away the day's grime. Ais was gone. Kenton frowned—how long had he been asleep?

Yawning, he pulled some clothing out of his trunk. It was wrinkled from the packing, but *ShalRim* tended to resist wrinkling, as opposed to the more expensive darkside materials, and once he had them on they didn't look so bad.

He pulled open the door, walking up toward the deck. As he stumbled into the light, he was surprised to find the ship resting beside a wooden dock, a large city extending around him. Lraezare.

"Sleep well?" a lazy voice asked.

Kenton spun to find Delious and his steward speaking with the ship captain beside the port wale.

"When did we arrive?" Kenton asked anxiously.

"Less than an hour ago," Delious replied. "The darkside girl insisted we let you sleep a little longer."

“Where are they?”

“In the city,” Delious said with a nod. “The Kershtian went to visit the temple; the others trying to figure out where old Vey is hiding.”

Kenton turned, scanning the city. Lraezare was built where the *Ali* met the ocean. Most of the city lay on the eastern side of the river, where reefs formed a natural bay that made a perfect dock. The city itself extended along the crescent-like peninsula which ran a short distance out into the ocean. It was built on an incline, with a line of enormous mansions running in a row at the hill’s apex. The homes of the Shipowner’s Circle.

Even as Kenton searched, he noted a distinctive dark-skinned form approaching down one of the main streets. Baon was very easy to pick out of a crowd, and Lraezare wasn’t nearly as busy as Kezare. Khriss and the others were walking with him.

“Lord Admiral?” an amazed voice said.

Kenton turned. He had been so focused on studying the city that he hadn’t noticed the blue-robed attendant who had walked up the plank. He was a short man with tiny, coin-like ears and wide eyes. His robes bore the symbol of the Helm on the breast—a symbol encased in a bright red circle.

“Yes?” Delious asked as he turned toward the man. The Lord Admiral suddenly appeared more drunk than he had just a moment before. He even managed to stumble and nearly topple to the deck as he turned—only his steward’s steadying hand prevented the collapse.

“My Lord…” the Helm member said, still stunned. “We weren’t aware that you were coming to visit.”

“I came on a whim,” Delious said, gesturing with his hand—the hand that held the cup. The movement accidentally sprayed the attendant with red drops of wine. Delious appeared not to have noticed the mistake.

The man turned, wiping a drop of wine from his forehead, noticing Kenton for the first time. His eyes thinned in suspicion. “I’ll go and tell the Circle of your arrival, My Lord,” he said to Delious.

“If you wish,” Delious said with a shrug. “I don’t see that it will matter, however. We’ll be leaving soon—I have to make certain the Lord Mastrell gets back in time for the next Council meeting. You’ve

heard of that, haven't you?"

The man paused for a moment. "Yes, My Lord. Good day, My Lord." He bowed, turning to dash down the plank.

Yes, you've heard of the Council meeting, Kenton thought suspiciously. He remembered well Delious's comments at the party a few days back—the Circle stood to gain a lot in shipping privileges to the *kerla* if the Diem were disbanded. Of all the *Kelzin* in Lossand, they had the greatest cause to oppose Kenton.

"Who was that?" Eric asked, climbing up the plank.

"I'm not certain," Kenton admitted, shooting a look back at Delious. The man was smiling foppishly, but there was an evil glint in his eye. *What are you planning, Lord Admiral?*

"Kenton, are you all right?" Khriss's voice rose behind him as the woman pushed past Eric and onto the deck.

"I feel surprisingly good," Kenton admitted.

"And the…"

"Sand?" Kenton asked. He shook his head. "No, not back yet."

"It will come," she encouraged.

"It had better," Eric noted. "Well, you have reason to thank us again, great Lord Mastrell."

"You found him?" Kenton assumed.

Eric nodded.

"He's staying with one of the local *Kelzi*," Khriss explained. "A man named Lokkall."

Delious snorted.

"What?" Kenton asked.

"Lokkall is head of the Shipowner's Circle. He's the man that does what I should." Delious smiled to himself. "Perhaps we should pay him a visit? I'm certain he'd be happy to see me. Then, we can all have a little discussion."

"An excellent idea," Kenton said. "Let's go. I'm eager to see the Lord Merchant again."

"Not as eager as I am to see his face when you walk in that door," Delious said quietly.

If Khriss were going to live on dayside, this would be the city she would choose. The sun was low in the sky, more than halfway down to the horizon. The resulting shadows were deep and cool, and now that it was lower in the sky, the sun seemed to have lost some of its

power. For the first time since she had arrived on dayside, she found she was able to go out in the light without her dark spectacles.

The entire city seemed to have a more leisurely feel to it. There were people on the streets, but they strolled instead of rushed. The streets were cobbled, and the buildings looked more… relaxed. They weren't squished together, like they were in Kezare. They were still made primarily of carapace and stone as opposed to wood, but the simpler one-story structures were more visually appealing than the Kezare versions.

The only thing wrong with the city was the hill. It was incredibly steep, and her legs were already complaining from being forced to climb it for the second time in a few hours. This time, however, she would have to go all the way to the top, not just halfway, where they had found the local Hall of Judgement. The trackts there had easily answered their questions as to the location of the Lord Merchant.

Kenton strode beside her, looking, as he said, fully recovered from the previous day's weakness. Khriss was still worried about him. Still, he looked fine, striding purposely up the hill. He seemed to be dealing well with his loss of mastering ability. She caught him reaching for his sand pouch occasionally, but he never said anything, never complained. In his arm, Kenton carried a ledger with a thin carapace binding. He had retrieved it from his trunk before they left.

"What is that, anyway?" she asked, pointing at the ledger.

Kenton looked down. "This? It's the record of how much the Diem owes."

Khriss frowned. "Why bring it?" she asked.

"If I can't get Vey on my side, then maybe I can get him to tell me who I owe the rest of this money to. If anyone has record of something like that, it would be him. In this case, I think he'd be eager to help me—it would, after all, involve laughing at the hopelessness of my cause."

Khriss nodded, holding out her hand for the ledger. Kenton handed to her, and she flipped to the last page as they walked. There, at the bottom, she found the daunting number.

700,000 lak. How could someone possibly accrue so much

debt? Yet, as she flipped through the pages, she noted that it went back decades—even centuries. There was an entry every month.

"Seven hundred thousand," she said out loud, her voice amazed.

"I know," Kenton said with dissatisfaction. "With that kind of debt, it's no wonder the others want to get rid of us.

And it didn't look like there was any way around it. She deciphered the writing top—it was written in Kersha—which announced quite prominently that the enormous number in the second column was the 'amount owed.'

"Good luck," she mumbled, handing him back the ledger.

Delious threw open the doors, striding into the home as if it were his own. "Hello?" he announced as several servants began to rush forward, their faces confused. "I've come for a visit! Someone bring me something to drink."

Kenton stepped in after the Lord Admiral, somewhat less certain of himself. Maybe they should have knocked…

"Welcome, Lord Admiral," a voice said. Lokkall was a tall, distinguished Kershtian man with thin beard and a long face. His voice, despite its words, did not sound very welcoming. "Your visit is… unexpected."

"I exist to make your life exciting," Delious announced, his overly-drunk persona returning. He leaned against a side wall, nearly knocking an intricately-painted vase off a nearby pedestal. A servant steadied it just in time.

"Where is our dear friend the Lord Merchant?" Delious asked innocently.

"The Lord Merchant?" Lokkall said, mock confusion on his face. "Why would I know where he is?"

Kenton frowned in dissatisfaction. Off to the side, standing behind several of the servants, he could make out a familiar blue robe—the attendant that had confronted Delious on the ship's deck just a short while before.

Vey was warned, Kenton thought with disappointment. Yet, they had left the ship just after the attendant. Vey couldn't have gotten much of a warning. He was probably still in the building somewhere.

"Vey, this is ludicrous," Kenton said, stepping forward. He spoke loudly, looking up at the second story and its closed doors with a

frown on his face. “If you didn’t want to vote for me, that is your choice. I will not force you do so. But you needn’t run. Surely you have more dignity than that. If you are so determined to destroy the Diem, then strike a blow against it valiantly. Don’t hide from sand mastery with a whimper and hope it will go away.”

There was no response.

Kenton sighed. “All right,” he said. Opening the ledger. “If you aren’t going to come back, then you can at least…” he trailed off, sighing as he looked down at the ledger.

Suddenly, the awesome weight of what he had to do pressed down on him. How had he possibly hoped to succeed? Why had he even tried? Why had he bothered coming south? Vey wasn’t going to go back with him. It had been a foolish idea in the first place. So many people hated the Diem, and it owed so much…

Amount owed. Suddenly, his eyes opened wide. Could it be?

His head snapped up. “All right, Vey,” he said. “If that is the way you want it. I’ll just take this ledger I found in my father’s office, the one that lists seven hundred lak on the bottom line, and turn it into the Lady Judge. I’m certain she—”

A door burst open at the top of the stairs, and a sweating Vey sprung out. “No!” he wailed.

Kenton looked up at the Lord Merchant. The man was a wreck—his hands were shaking, his eyes wide, and his clothing disheveled.

“Let’s talk,” Kenton said, smiling slightly to himself. “Lord Lokkall, do you mind if we use one of your rooms?”

Lokkall paused, looking up at Vey. Then he looked back at Kenton, noting the golden sash. “Of course not, Lord Mastrell,” he said with a slight frown on his face.

Kenton walked up the steps, resting his hand on Vey’s shoulder as he reached the top, leading the small Kershtian man toward the back room.

“Trying to leave me behind, Lord Mastrell?” a voice demanded.

Kenton turned. Ais stood in the doorway below. “Ah, you’re here,” he said. “Good. You should hear this. Come on.”

Ais frowned at the comment, but he did walk up the stairs and join Kenton and Vey. The three entered the room, which turned out to be some sort of study, with a desk, bookshelf, and several stools.

Kenton closed the door behind him. “You owe the Diem seven

hundred thousand lak, don't you, Vey?" he asked.

Vey groaned softly, taking a seat on a stool.

Kenton smiled, but for some reason he didn't feel like gloating. *He thinks his life is destroyed,* Kenton realized, suddenly feeling sorry for the man. *If it came out that he had such a large debt, he wouldn't just lose his place as Lord Merchant, but his status as a kelzi as well. Oh sands, I know how he must feel.*

"But how?" Kenton asked. "How could you possibly…" he paused. The amount had been accruing for centuries. "The Lord Merchant acquires all the wealth of his predecessor. Does that mean he acquires all of the former Lord Merchant's debts too?"

Vey nodded, looking sick. Ais stood beside the far wall, watching the Lord Merchant with keen eyes.

"A long time ago, a Lord Mastrell must have started a personal account with a Lord Merchant," Kenton guessed. "And, since the Diem didn't really need money, the Lord Mastrell would place all of the tribute money in the account."

"His name was Hennin," Vey whispered. "An idiot of a Lord Merchant. He acquired the position by accident—a relative died, leaving him a fortune that, stacked upon the one his father left him, was enough to win him the title of Lord Merchant. Unfortunately, he ruled for a very long time. When the next Lord Merchant obtained the position, he found a previous unknown ledger listing a vast amount owed to the Lord Mastrell. The interest that had been accruing was monumental. Hennin had lost most of his fortune in the failed deal that lost him the Lord Merchantship, so the new Lord Merchant didn't acquire any of the man's money—only his debts.

"Over the next few centuries, the interest continued to accrue. Eventually it became so large that no Lord Merchant could ever pay it. Fortunately, the Lord Mastrell was willing to keep the account private, which meant it wasn't counted in the Lord Merchant's public avowal of wealth. Otherwise, every Lord Merchant that inherited the Taisha would immediately lose it.

"The Lord Mastrells used the debt to force the Lord Merchants into continuing to pay the tribute. Each quarter, the Lord Merchant would have to send two thousand lak of his personal fortune to the Diem. The Lord Mastrell would immediately return it, of course—telling the Lord Merchant to deposit it in the private account. So,

while the Lord Merchants didn't actually lose money, the private debt grew incredibly large."

"And now that debt is yours," Kenton said, feeling sorry for the poor man before him. Vey was weeping openly now, and Ais was regarding the man with a look of barely-veiled disgust.

"Someone else must know about it," Kenton continued. "Otherwise it would simply be one Taisha's word against another. The Lady Judge?"

Vey nodded.

Kenton shook his head ruefully. *You knew all along, Lady Heelis. You gave me a seemingly impossible task, knowing all the time that there was a way to get beyond it.*

"The Lord Judge several decades ago decreed that the debt wasn't good for Lossand," Vey explained between quiet sobs. "He said that when and if the Lord Mastrell demanded payment, the Lord Merchant at that time would have to take responsibility for the full amount, rather than passing it on to his successor."

"That is harsh," Kenton said, shaking his head.

Vey took a deep breath. "Well, you have succeeded, *Ry'Kensha*," he hissed. "You've beaten me—you can continue a century-long tradition of blackmail. Hall sanctioned blackmail, no less. Force the Lord Merchant to be your slave, as others have done before you. You have my vote, just keep this debt silent."

Kenton regarded the man, sitting abjectly on the stool. *No wonder he hates the Diem so. I almost hate the Diem for doing something like that.* The worst thing was, his position seemed to demand that he continue the extortion. Or, at least, just long enough to get Vey's vote.

But, could he? He had spent the last few weeks preaching that the Diem could change, that it would change. What would it matter to get Vey's vote if by doing so he had to sacrifice the Diem's integrity?

The Council was right, Kenton realized. *The Diem should have been disbanded.*

"I don't want your vote, Vey," Kenton said quietly.

The Lord Merchant looked up with a distrusting eye.

"I want your support," Kenton explained. "The two aren't the

same. The debt is foolishness—consider it forgiven."

Vey's jaw dropped in stupefaction. More satisfying, however, was the look of amazement on Ais's face. Kenton smiled slightly to himself, but his stomach churned at the mistake he had missed. If only he could…

No, he decided. *I've already made my decision. The Lady Judge is right—if the Diem can't convinced the people of Lossand that it should exist, then it doesn't deserve to do so. That includes the Kershtians, the trackts, and the merchants. I've spent my life trying to force people to do what I want. I won't see the Diem's rebirth founded on such principles.*

He turned with a quiet sigh, pulling open the door. How was he going to explain this to the others? Khriss would probably kill him.

"Wait," Vey objected. "What are your demands?"

"Demands?" Kenton asked. "There are none, Vey. I don't expect you to be responsible for that money—it was improperly gained. The mastrells extorted it out of the Guild, forcing your to use your own money to push yourselves deeper into debt. That's simply not right."

"But," Vey said, his face completely baffled. "I have to vote for you before the debt will be forgiven, don't I?"

Kenton shook his head. "You vote as your conscience demands, Vey. Represent the people of your Profession as you have been elected to do. If you think that the Diem's continuation is not in their best interests, then you have no choice but to vote against me."

The concept seemed beyond Vey's comprehension. Of course, Kenton had just abandoned seven hundred thousand lak. That was a fairly amazing amount of money.

Vey considered his words for a moment, obviously unable to believe that the shadow that had oppressed him for so long was finally gone.

"What do you want?" Vey finally asked.

"Want?" Kenton asked, turning. "What I want is a loan, Vey. Two hundred thousand lak—from the Guild, not you—to pay off our debts. You can take a lean against the sand masters's future wages until the sum is paid off. The interest from such an amount alone should be enough to make the Guild a handsome sum."

“And I don’t have to vote for you?” Vey asked, still stunned.

“No,” Kenton said, shaking his head.

“But, if I don’t, then I won’t make the money off the loan,” Vey assumed.

“I suppose,” Kenton said with a shrug.

“So it is a threat!” Vey decided with a satisfied smile.

“No… it…” Kenton sighed. “Never mind.”

“Well, I accept your proposition, Lord Mastrell,” Vey announced, catching Kenton’s eye. There was intellect there—Vey wasn’t quite as misunderstanding as he had made himself seem.

He won’t be able to justify his switched vote unless there’s some reason, Kenton realized. *The members of his profession think in terms of monetary gain and loss. If Vey changed his mind because of my kindness, he would be ridiculed. If he voted for me because of some future monetary gain, however…*

Kenton chuckled slightly. “Yes, then,” he declared. “You’d better vote for me, otherwise you won’t see a lak of that loan money.”

“You are a cruel bargainer, Lord Mastrell,” Vey returned, also smiling slightly. “I will curse your name right up to the moment I vote for you.” He leaned in close, adding in a lower voice, “I will, however, pray for your soul, Lord Mastrell. The Sand Lord is known to be more lenient with those who are merciful themselves. I trust you have arranged passage back to Kezare?”

“I have,” Kenton said. “We can leave as soon as we pick up the Lord General.”

“Reegent?” the short Kershtian asked. “Where is he?”

Kenton paused. “Didn’t he come with you?”

Vey shook his head.

“He disappeared from the Tower about the same time you left for Lraezare,” Kenton explained. “The rumors were that he had come with you.”

“I know nothing of Reegent,” Vey said, his face earnest.

Sands, Kenton thought with concern. *Where is he?*

They left the room, Kenton enthusiastic, Vey relieved, and Ais looking very, very confused. Down below, Kenton was surprised to see that the small entryway had been filled to capacity during his absence. Fully twenty men stood below, each bearing the circled Helm symbol on the breast of their robes.

Kenton frowned—this could be none other than the Shipowner's Circle. They were of little importance to him, however. He would soon be leaving.

"Lord Delious, I trust our ship has room for one more passenger," Kenton asked.

"I suppose," Delious said with a shrug. "Especially if it's Lord Vey—everyone knows how fond I am of him."

"Good, then let us prepare to go," Kenton said, shooting an uncomfortable look at the Circle. The men were watching him as he went down the stairs, their faces distrustful.

"I think you will find that a difficult task without a ship," Lokkall said smoothly.

Kenton turned suspicious eyes on the head of the Circle. The tall Kershtian man was smiling to himself. "Without a ship?" Kenton demanded quietly.

"I'm afraid the Council had need of your ship," Lokkall informed. "Your things are sitting on the docks. The captain set sail for Kezare fifteen minutes ago."

Kenton cursed, gritting his teeth in anger.

Delious just laughed. "What a childish move," he declared, draining the wine from his ever-present cup.

"Don't worry, Lokkall," Vey said quickly. "The Lord Mastrell and I have come to an agreement. I shall need to return to Kezare immediately."

Lokkall shot Vey a disgusted look—one Vey received with narrowed eyes of distrust. "I care not if you choose to deal with the unholy one, Vey," Lokkall hissed in Kershtian. "I have other concerns. It is very important that you make no vote in that Council."

"You wouldn't!" Vey challenged. "This is outrageous!"

"It's unimportant, is what it is," Delious cut in. No one but Kenton seemed to notice his flawless Kershtian. Delious switched back to Lossandin. "We'll just commandeer another boat—I can take my pick, you know."

"Not any more, Delious," Lokkall said, a sneer on his face.

"What?" Delious asked.

"Delious of Kezare," Lokkall announced in a firm voice, the other Circle members standing supportively behind him, "by

unanimous vote of the Shipowner's Circle, you are hereby stripped of your title as Lord Admiral. Your drunkenness has been an embarrassment to the Helm for long enough. You have cost it exorbitant sums and offered no service in return. Your support of this sand master, enemy of the Helm, is the final grain of sand. You have gone too far, and we are left with no choice. Consider yourself released. As of this moment, you are possessionless—as per the Law, all that you had is now the Helm's. Your service, such as it was, is appreciated."

Delious slumped back against the wall, his eyes wide with shock. "I'm… released?" he asked. "Now? After all this time…"

Lokkall smiled, turning to Kenton. "As you see, Lord Mastrell, you appear to be without a means of transportation. You might be able to commandeer some tonks—the trip should only take you a week."

Kenton cursed to himself. *Will this never stop?* He thought with frustration. *Every time I close my eyes, something else new—*

"You have the documents?" a new voice suddenly asked.

Kenton frowned. He thought he recognized the voice—it was familiar, yet different. He turned amazed eyes toward Delious. The former Lord Admiral was standing tall, his aged face somehow looking distinguished despite his foolish clothing.

"Right here, Delious," Delious's steward said from behind, unrolling several sheets of paper.

"Good. Let me sign them." Delious's voice was firm—in control. He showed no sign of his former drunkenness. "Trackt," he said, nodding toward Ais. "Would you look these over to judge their legality?"

Ais stepped down in front of Kenton, accepting the sheets and looking over them. "These look in order," he said after a moment of study.

"What are they?" Lokkall said, a bit of uncertainty creeping into his voice.

"Deeds," Ais said. "Deeds to ships, it appears."

Lokkall grew pale.

"As Lord Admiral, I was forbidden to own property," Delious said with a quiet smile. "But the Charter says nothing about my servants. Or my son."

“Oh, sands…” Lokkall whispered.

“Delin,” Delious said, looking over the deeds, “is there still a carapace shortage in Kezare?”

“I believe so, father,” the steward said, smiling broadly.

“Why is that again?”

The steward chuckled. “Probably because you ordered all of our ships to buy the incoming loads of carapace and keep them in their holds.”

“How many ships do I have in Kezare’s docks?”

“Twelve, father,” the steward replied, shooting a satisfied look at the Circle.

Delious nodded. “Send our fastest skimmer north. Order the captains to unload their cargoes and sell them at a fourth of the going price.”

Fully five members of the Shipowner’s Circle fainted at that remark. Kenton smiled to himself. With the Kezare shortage, it only made sense that they would have purchased all of the carapace in the south and begun shipping it to the north. Entire fortunes could be made—or lost—on such an opportunity.

Delious handed the deeds back to his son and took a step forward, staring Lokkall directly in the eyes. “When you steal a man’s fortune, when you give him a title mocked and reviled by the rest of the nation, and when you give him five years to contemplate his hatred, make certain you *never* give him a chance to get revenge. Remember that next time.”

Delious spun to face the rest of the Circle, most of whom were helping their stunned comrades back to their feet.

“I nominate Lokkall as the new Lord Admiral,” Delious announced. “If enough of you vote with me, I will change my order, and only sell my carapace at half the going rate instead of a fourth. Those in favor, please make it known.”

The vote was unanimous. To his credit, Lokkall managed to bear it without fainting.

Delious nodded at the result, turning to the new Lord Admiral. “You are now Lord Admiral, Lokkall,” he said with a hint of vengeance in his voice. “All of your wealth is forfeit. All of your ships are forfeit. You can demand nothing from us but a home and some food. You will probably grow to have a taste for wine, if you

don't have one already."

Lokkall closed his eyes, a look of pain on his face.

"This is what you did to me, Lokkall," Delious whispered. "Feel it. But, unlike you, I'm going to give you a way out. I am going to personally hold all of your wealth and ships. Vote for the Lord Mastrell in the Council, and I will find a new Lord Admiral and return your possessions to you. Do you understand?"

Lokkall nodded, his eyes dazed.

"Good," Delious snapped. He turned to Kenton. "Are we going?"

Kenton nodded, smiling. "I suppose."

Delious began to walk toward the door. He paused, however, next to his son, removing a wine bottle from the man's pouch. He uncorked the bottle smelling the wine inside with closed eyes. Then he turned it over and dumped the wine on the floor of Lokkall's mansion.

"You know the ironic thing?" Delious asked to no one in particular. "I absolutely loath wine. Always have."

Khriss caught up to Kenton and Delious as they walked toward the docks. Kenton had explained the way the Lord Admiral was chosen, and she had thought it atrocious. She had known that there was more to the Lord Admiral than he had let on, but this…? Eric had translated most of what was said—though he did so in his summarizing way. Still, she had understood most of what happened.

"So," she demanded, pushing her way between Kenton and Delious, "you were faking all this time?" she asked with amazement, forcing Kenton to play translator.

"Define faking, Khrissalla," Delious responded. "I really did feel like a fool. I really did feel like drinking myself senseless. I really did loose faith in truth and justice. I didn't give up, however. I spent the first month after my appointment to the Lord Admiralship feeling sorry for myself. After that, I began planning. You don't become a successful merchant without knowing how to deal with temporary setbacks."

"Five years is hardly temporary," Kenton noted.

Delious smiled, a bit of his old humor showing through. "It is, when compared to a lifetime," he noted.

"True," Kenton admitted.

“Only the Council could release me,” Delious explained as they walked down the street. Going down suited Khriss much more than climbing up. “Therefore, the only thing I could do was annoy them to the point that they decided to get rid of me.”

“And you planned for all those years…” Khriss said with amazement.

“I had little else to do,” Delious pointed out.

“I have a question, Delious,” Kenton asked. “Why are you helping me? Your plan is finished; you won. Wouldn’t it be better for your profession to oppose the Diem?”

Delious shrugged. “Perhaps,” he admitted. “The truth is, Lord Mastrell, that I empathize with you. I know treachery, and I know what it is like to fight impossible odds. What was done to your profession was not right, and I will not support its destruction.”

Khriss shook her head. She couldn’t believe the change in the man. He walked proudly now, where he had stumbled foolishly before. His eyes were keen, rather than dulled by drink. He spoke firmly, rather than with slurred tones. She had yet to meet a person on dayside who felt more like a nobleman than the new Delious. He had the lucid eyes and honest face of a kind and just lord.

No wonder the Circle was afraid of him, she thought. She turned to Kenton. “And what about you?” she asked. “What did you do up there? How did you beat that merchant into submission?”

“I didn’t,” Kenton said frankly. “It turns out he was the one who owed the seven hundred thousand, not the Diem. He had a debt that transferred from Lord Merchant to Lord Merchant—a debt owed to the Diem.”

“So, you demanded it from him?” Khriss asked with amazement. Suddenly, he was rich.

“No,” Kenton said. “I forgave it. I didn’t want to get money that way.”

“You…” Khriss said, trailing off. “Kenton, that was stupid.”

Kenton chuckled to himself.

“What?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” he said. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Vey was so impressed that he offered to let me push him into giving me his vote.”

“What?” Khriss asked.

“I’ll explain later.”

She frowned—she never liked that answer. She didn’t press the point, however. “How are we going to get back?” she asked. “Didn’t they send our ship away?”

Delious smiled. “Delin,” he said, addressing the nondescript man who was apparently his son, “how many ships do we have in the Lraezare docks?”

“Three,” Delin replied.

“Which one is the fastest?”

“The *Kalqin*,” Delin informed.

“Tell the captain we’ll be leaving for Kezare within the hour.”

“Yes, sir,” Delin said, nodding and hurrying ahead.

“He’s a good boy,” Delious mumbled. “His mother left me when I lost my fortune—the first time, I mean.”

Khriss froze, stopping in place. “Wait a minute,” she said. “What about the Lord General?”

Delious paused too, frowning. “You’re right. Wasn’t he supposed to be here?”

Kenton shook his head. “No. Vey said he hadn’t come with him.”

“Then where is he?” Delious asked.

Kenton just shook his head. “We only have three days to find out.”

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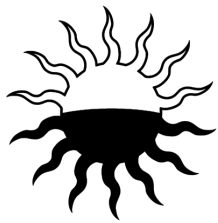

A good tailwind sped their progress north. Even still, travelling against the current meant that it would take nearly two days to complete the trip. Kenton withstood it in silent frustration. By the time they got back to Kezare, he would only have one day until the fight with Drile and the judgement, which would occur a few hours later.

He was so close. Vey's support would not only bring him the Lord Farmer, but the loan should be enough to placate the Lord Artisan. The Diem would still have debts—however, many professions took out loans from the Guild. He could only hope that the Lady Judge would accept the deal, with the promise of payment, as proof that the Diem was on the road to financial stability.

Kenton leaned against the ship's wale, watching the land pass. A short distance away, he could see Vey speaking quietly with the elderly Cynder—as a merchant, Vey knew a smattering of Dynastic. It was odd, seeing Vey in such a manner—seeing him as a person, rather than an opponent. He laughed happily with Cynder, trying out his limited vocabulary. He was the Lord Merchant, and he was a Kershtian, but he was still a person.

Maybe if I hadn't assumed he would oppose me from the beginning, I could have avoided all of this, Kenton realized with

guilt. Of course, that was his problem, wasn't it? He assumed everyone was against him. It had seemed that way in the Diem, and he had fought for so long that he had begun to see the entire world in a similar manner.

You were right, father. You were right all along. I was a fool. He felt relieved, in a way, to realize that. The world seem like a much more optimistic place now that he understood that he didn't necessarily have to defend himself against everyone he met. Of course, he still had to win the Diem's judgement.

Delious had secured him the Lord Admiral's vote. Even if Kenton didn't personally agree with Delious's motives, he couldn't fault the man. After what had happened to Delious, he had a right to be ruthless. The opportunity he had offered Lokkall, allowing the man to have his possessions back after his term as Lord Admiral, was far more merciful than could be expected.

Delious stood now, speaking quietly with the ship captain as they sailed north. Kenton watched them, leaning against the bow wale. His nose and eyes no longer red from alcohol, the former Lord Admiral cut an imposing figure. He had abandoned his flowery robes, instead choosing ones of a more moderate style—simple tans and grays. However, the plain clothing did not detract from his presence.

Before, one's eyes had been drawn directly to Delious's clothing, and its flowery bright colors and frills had formed an immediate impression in the viewer. Now, however, the clothing faded to the background, allowing one to realize just how distinguished a man Delious was. He stood tall and proud, his gray-flecked hair lending him a sagacious air.

This is the type of man I would become, Kenton decided. He could immediately tell why Delious had been so successful, no matter what Profession he chose. He had an air that made men want to follow him. His movements bespoke experience.

Kenton turned around, staring out across the passing river, feeling the cool breeze blowing against his face, the ship quivering slightly below him as it forced its way against the current. Perhaps someday he could be like Delious, but only if he survived the next few days.

His powers still hadn't returned. He was beginning to think

Khriss and Eric were right—he had been a fool to do something so drastic so close to the judgement. Of course, despite all of his successes, he still had three votes he couldn't count on. Dirin's ploy to gain the Talloner vote was a completely random factor. The Lord General, the first supporter he had thought he'd gained, had disappeared completely.

Most stressful of all, however, was the Lady Judge's vote. With Ais giving her information, Kenton could only guess what she thought of him. The loan from Vey was only a half-answer to her demand that the Diem get rid of its debts, and he had no idea how she would judge whether or not the Diem had convinced the people of Lossand to accept it.

At least I can count on one thing, he thought ruefully. The Lady Judge had told him that the Diem needed a solid leader in order to prove itself. One way or another, the sand masters would have their leader—either he would kill Drile or, more likely, Drile would kill him. Kenton could only hope that if that happened, all of the Taisha would still vote as they had promised.

"It's not working."

Khriss paused. She had just left her cabin and was on her way up to the deck. The voice, however, made her pause. It was coming from the room Eric shared with Cynder. The door was slightly ajar. Cynder, however, was on deck—or he had been a few minutes ago when she'd left him. Who was Eric talking too?

"You've done a pretty good job, these last few years," Eric said conversationally. "Except for that one incident, of course. Still, for the most part you've completely avoided responsibility. No worries. No one depending on you. No one dying for you."

Khriss frowned. Who could he possibly…? Feeling a little embarrassed—but only a little—she peeked through the open door and scanned the room. Eric reclined on his bunk, staring up at the ceiling. There was no one else in the room.

"He's going to drag you down with him," Eric continued. "Already, you feel as if you have some stake in this stupid contest. You feel that if he doesn't succeed, you will have somehow failed. How did you let yourself get pulled into something like this? Next thing you know, he'll try to talk you into being captain of his personal guard."

Why is he talking to himself? Khriss wondered, rechecking the room for another occupant. She shook her head. *You've always known he was a little odd*, she reminded herself, leaving the door behind and continuing on up to the deck.

Kenton stood by the bow, looking out over the passing waters, and Delious was speaking with the captain. Cynder sat in the same place as before, compiling a list of words he had collected from Lossandin, trying to outline the language's grammatical structure with the help of the diminutive Lord Merchant. All of them seemed absorbed in what they were doing, and didn't appear as if they would appreciate an interruption. And, since Eric was talking to himself and Baon was down below napping, Khriss was left without anything to do.

Well, I'll go bother Kenton, she decided. *He's used to it. Besides, it isn't good for him to spend so much time thinking about his fight with Drile.* Besides, she had something she wanted to talk to him about—something she had been avoiding for the last few days.

She approached quietly, but he noticed her anyway, turning to see who it was, then smiling when he realized it was Khriss.

Once that would have been a scowl, she realized. *He would have been annoyed when he saw it was me. What changed?*

She walked over, leaning against the wale beside him. The water rushed below, looking so cool and refreshing. She was almost tempted to leap in. Of course, even if the ship hadn't been moving, that probably wouldn't have been a good idea. The daysiders would all immediately assume she had gone insane.

"I don't think two weeks have ever passed more quickly," Kenton said, staring out across the water.

Khriss nodded, regarding his contemplative face. The weeks may have passed quickly, but it seemed like each day had contained a year's worth of experiences. Kenton had grown solemn and responsible during that time. He still had the same smirk, but it was tempered by discerning eyes and an earnest temperament.

"If only I had another week," he said quietly. "Time to firm up my support, time to make certain the Taisha really will vote for me. Time to get my powers back…"

"Everyone always wishes for more time," Khriss said. "It's

human nature. Next week always seems better than right now."

"Not always," Kenton said, turning to meet her eyes. "Some moments I wish would never pass. Sometimes I wish I could drift in the here, wish that next week would never come. Some instants are special."

Khriss couldn't speak for a long time. She simply stood, staring into his bright daysider eyes. They were so colorful—she'd never noticed that before. They had no Skycolor, but the seemed to shine anyway. Blue, with flecks of green.

Eventually he turned, looking back across the moving shore. Behind them, Khriss heard Eric's voice speaking with Cynder—the daysider must have finished his conversation with himself and come up on deck.

"The Kershtians say immortality is being held in the Sand Lord's memory for all time," Kenton whispered. "As long as he knows you, you live on." He turned back to her. "Remember me," he requested.

"Don't talk like that," she said. "You'll live."

Kenton didn't respond.

"Come back with me," Khriss suddenly heard herself blurt.

"What?" Kenton asked.

Inside, Khriss cursed her lack of tact. She'd been wondering how to make the offer without sounding too forward. She'd spoken now, however. There was nothing to do now but continue on.

"Come back to darkside with me," she repeated. "Don't let him kill you, Kenton. Come to Elis with me. You'll like it there—darkside is a beautiful place."

Kenton smiled slightly. "You should have asked me two weeks ago," he replied, "before I learned responsibility."

"You'll die!" Khriss objected. "There's no responsibility in that. You've done your best—once we find the Lord General, we can leave. The Diem will be safe."

Kenton shook his head. "And how would the Taisha regard such an act?" he asked. "The sand masters have been cowards through the history of Lossand, Khriss. They hid behind their power, never taking responsibility for what they did. If I run now, I'll just confirm everything my opposition has been saying. If I die fighting, that is one thing. But I can't run. I began this, I must do my best to finish it."

“Oh, Kenton,” she whispered, searching for hope in his eyes. She had been wrong about him. When she had compared him to Gevin, she had pronounced Gevin perfect and Kenton flawed. How naïve she had been.

Gevin wasn’t perfect. But, neither was Kenton. That wasn’t the point. Perhaps if she hadn’t idolized Gevin so much, she might have seen what he was trying to tell her.

Kenton wasn’t perfect, but he was many other things. He had courage and determination—both things she respected in him. He fought on, no matter how horrible things seemed. He made Khriss want to do likewise, made her feel—by association—that Elis really could stand against the Dynasty, that she really could do something to help, and that, despite her recent failures, she could find the things she yearned for.

Kenton reached out, touching her cheek lightly with the tips of his fingers. The moment, however, was spoiled as the captain began to yell curses. Khriss turned. A smaller ship had come close to getting itself run down by their ship. The captain had his fist raised in the air, and was yelling at the other captain.

Kenton chuckled, shaking his head. “I haven’t heard that word in a while,” he mumbled.

Suddenly, Khriss noticed something. The smaller ship wasn’t responding to the captain’s curses. It was still drifting closer to their ship. It was a flat, barge-like vessel, with several figures standing on its deck. Eight of them, their skin an olive tan.

“Kenton, down!” she said, pushing him to the deck as the archers began to fire. Screams rang out across the ship as sailors dropped, arrows sprouting from their bodies. Ropes thunked against the side of the ship. It took them a moment—the Kershtians didn’t look too happy to be on the water—but they did make it onto the ship, and they immediately turned toward Kenton.

“Get below decks!” Kenton urged, pushing Khriss toward the open cabin doors. She would probably be safe down there—the assassins were only after him.

But why shoot the sailors? He thought with confusion. Then he realized why as a couple of sailors pulled out short swords, standing defensively. They were probably trained to deal with the possibility of piracy. Only two were still standing, however—the captain and

another man.

Khriss followed his command, scuttling toward the doorway. Two of the assassins got there first, however, slamming the door closed.

What? Kenton thought with surprise. Then he saw them throw down the bar, locking the door. Baon and Ais were both down there. Without them, and without his sand mastery…

Oh, sands!

Five of the Kershtians were heading toward them, their weapons held suspiciously, their steps uncertain on the rocking ship's deck. Still, they were determined, despite their discomfort at being on the water. They had shot off all of their arrows trying to kill him and the sailors. Each of the five had either a sword or a shortspear, however.

Suddenly, Kenton realized just how much trouble he was in. The Kershtians only paused to see what he would do—his defeat of their comrades in the past had made them wary. As soon as they realized he wasn't going to use sand, they would attack.

I can't fight five men at once! He thought with despair. Even on a good day, he was lucky if he could defeat a single trained warrior in combat, let alone five. *This is it then*. He wouldn't even survive long enough to be killed by Drile.

Khriss made it halfway to the stairs before the two Kershtians blocked it, holding the portal to keep any more people from coming up on deck. Behind her, Kenton was quickly surrounded by five warriors. The last man moved toward the captain and Delious, holding his *zinkall* threateningly.

No! Khriss thought angrily, crouching down and pressing herself against the wale. She had to do something. Without his sand, Kenton was in serious danger.

She looked anxiously across deck, searching for something to help. The door downstairs was shaking—Baon was probably using something to try battering it open. The two Kershtians were still standing there, however, holding the door shut. Baon wouldn't dare fire his pistols through, not without knowing who he might hit.

There was nothing she could do.

Suddenly, the five Kershtians advanced on Kenton, two swinging at him directly, distracting him while the other three moved around

to flank him. Kenton parried recklessly, trying to fight the two men before him while keeping his eye on the ones to the side. It wasn't working very well.

Khriss continued to search for help. Cynder and Vey had fled, and were seeking cover on the other side of the ship. Neither one of them would be much help. She turned, desperate.

At that moment, her eyes me Eric's. He crouched beside the opposite wale, watching the battle with calm eyes. He wasn't going to do anything.

Khriss held his eyes. *Please!* She tried to communicate the feeling with her eyes. She didn't know what he could do, but she had seen him in the previous fight. He had at least some experience. Eric watched the battle. He saw the sailors fall. He saw the Kershtians effectively barricade the door shut, buying their allies just enough time to perform their duty. He saw Kenton get attacked. He saw Khriss's pleading look.

I can't! he thought with agony. *Not this. After so long, not this…*

Kenton was getting flanked. The two in front were just a distraction—one of the spearmen would get him from behind and it would all be over.

You are a fool, Kenton! He thought angrily. *It's your fault for losing your powers!*

The Kershtians drew closer. Kenton would be dead in a matter of seconds.

"It's your own fault," Eric whispered. "You should never have come back."

Eric moved.

Khriss watched with wide eyes as he sprang forward, leaping up to the aft deck where the single Kershtian was threatening the captain. The assassin didn't even have time to turn around as Eric slammed his elbow into the man's back. Khriss heard a crack, and the Kershtian fell with a cry of pain.

Eric caught the man's spear as it fell, reaching over the Kershtian's shoulder to snatch the weapon out of the air. He spun and jumped, leaping off the upper deck, over the two Kershtians holding the door closed, and engaging the other five from behind.

One caught a spear in the neck as he turned. The second barely

had time to perform an awkward swing before the but of Eric's weapon sent him backward, his face a splash of red.

Eric spun, hurling the spear at one of the door-holding Kershtians, taking the man in the chest as he raised his *zinkall*. Behind Eric, one of the other soldiers swung, but Eric was already ducking. The weapon passed over his head. The Kershtian preformed an awkward backswing, but Eric caught the weapon before it gained momentum.

Eric twisted his hand in a quick motion, spinning the blade out of the Kershtian's hand. Eric reached forward, snatching the sword by its hilt in mid-air. The Kershtian fell by his own sword as Eric's reach for the weapon became a swing in one fluid motion.

Kenton regarded the exchange with wide eyes. He finally regained his poise and engaged one of the remaining Kershtians. Eric took the second man as Baon finally burst through the door behind them. The large warrior had his pistols out.

All three Kershtians fell at once One taken in the side by Kenton's wild swing, one with a pistol bullet in his chest, the third nearly decapitated by Eric's sword. Khriss sat stunned—the entire battle had only taken a few seconds.

Eric's face was twisted horribly with some sort of inner pain. He regarded the weapon in his hand with loathing, as if he wanted to toss it away. He didn't, however. It was as if the weapon were attached to his hand.

Kenton approached him. "Eric, I…"

Eric hissed his response, pushing past Kenton and striding below deck, the sword still clutched in his hand.

"Oh, sands…" Kenton whispered, looking over the carnage. Eric's skill was still there. His motions had been less fluid than Kenton remembered, his thrusts a little less precise, but even an out-of-practice Eric was an awesome sight to behold.

"This isn't good," he said as Khriss approached.

"What's wrong with him?" Khriss asked.

Kenton shook his head. "I don't know. I never really understood why he left, but it had something to do with this." He nodded toward the dead Kershtians. "I think he's afraid of his own ability, Khriss. He was always a gifted fighter—I've never seen a man so good with a sword. He never said anything, but I could see it in his

eyes. He scared himself, sometimes…”

Baon was inspecting the dead, too far away to hear their conversation. “Who did this?” he demanded, standing. “Not you, sand master?”

Kenton shook his head. “Eric,” he replied.

“Impossible,” Baon responded, not argumentative, just firm.

“It’s true.”

Baon frowned. “If he were a warrior, I would have been able to sense it. Men who fight carry themselves in a certain way, sand master. You do so, I do so, whoever did this should definitely do so.”

Kenton paused. “Eric is a special case, Baon,” he said.

“Apparently,” Baon said, still looking disturbed.

After the fight, the captain had immediately begun checking the wounded. Cynder, Delious, and Delious’s son helped him, while Vey sat on a deck chair, looking flustered from the attack. Eventually, the captain turned to Delious. Half of his ten-man crew was dead, three others couldn’t walk.

“This is bad, My Lord,” he said. “We’ll have to stop for more men. We can’t continue on with only two.”

“My son and I will help,” Delious said.

“My Lord!” the captain said. “Surely—”

“I know what to do,” Delious said, interrupting the man with a curt gesture. “No matter what else happens, we have to get to Kezare in time. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” the captain said, still troubled.

“Tell them I will help, if they need it,” Baon said, watching the conversation and apparently understanding what it was about despite the language barrier.

“You know how to sail?” Kenton asked with surprise.

Baon smiled slightly. “You’d be surprised what my training includes, sand master.”

Kenton nodded. “What about the bodies?” he asked in Lossandin.

Delious frowned, looking over the corpses. “Throw them on the assassins’ ship,” he decided, nodding to the vessel which was still connected to their own by a couple of hooked ropes. “Then set it afire.”

“No!” Ais objected, appearing from below decks to survey the destruction. “These men must be buried in deep sand.”

“We don’t have time to deal with Kershtian foolishness, trackt,” Delious said. “Burning is good enough for these.”

“A man who is not buried in deep sand never finds his way to the Sand Lord’s embrace,” Ais said firmly. “Place them on the other boat, if you must, but tow it along with us. I will see to them once we reach the city.”

“That’s a little… morbid, don’t you think?” Kenton asked.

Ais caught his eyes. “Not as morbid as burning them, *Ry’Kensha*,” he said.

Kenton sighed. “We might as well humor him, Delious,” he suggested.

“All right,” Delious agreed.

Kenton waited apprehensively beside Eric’s door, not certain if he should knock or not. The rest of the day had passed with a muted tone, an amorphous sense of discomfort covering the ship. Eric hadn’t emerged from his quarters since he disappeared down below hours before.

Kenton lowered his hand. *I’ll let him sleep on it,* he decided, turning back toward his own room. As he did so, Khriss and the elderly Cynder clomped down the steps.

Cynder chuckled, nodding toward the door. “I think, perhaps, I shall relocate for the time being. Might I make my bed in your room, Lord Mastrell?”

“Of course,” Kenton said. “You can have my bunk.”

“No need,” Cynder said with a raised hand.

“Cynder, I can’t let you sleep on the—”

“Why doesn’t he sleep in his own bunk?” a solemn voice asked.

Kenton froze, watching Eric’s door creep open. He wasn’t certain what he expected to see, so he wasn’t really surprised when he found Eric dressed in nondescript dayside robes. A sword was tied at his waist, sheathed in a scabbard that seemed familiar for some reason.

Eric’s face, however, was chilling. It was calm, nearly expressionless. His eyes seemed dull when compared to the energy they had once held.

“Hello, Kenton,” he said, his voice smooth, even, and unhurried.

“How long do you think it will be before we arrive?”

Kenton’s lips parted slightly in surprise. He recognized that voice. It was Eric—the Eric he knew, from years before. He stood formally, as he had been trained by his father. He spoke evenly, with an almost contrived voice.

“Eric…” he said, somewhat at a loss. “It’s all right, you don’t need to do this. It was a fluke. I’m sorry you got pulled in, but, really, you don’t need to go back to what you were before.”

“A leader must be prepared to take responsibility for his actions, Kenton,” Eric said smoothly. “Men live or die depending on his ability to make decisions.”

Kenton frowned. The statement didn’t make sense in response to what Kenton had said. It was, however, one of Reegent’s favorite topics. Kenton could hear the Lord General in Eric’s voice, could hear a father sternly teaching the rules of life to his son, the heir.

Eric turned to Khriss, performing a stiff-backed half bow. “Lady Khrissalla,” he said. “I apologize for any impropriety I have engaged in. No offence was intended.”

Khriss shot Kenton a worried look. She didn’t know what to make of the change. Cynder, however, simply shrugged, moving into the room and sitting on his bunk.

Eric nodded to Kenton and Khriss. “Sleep well, Kenton, My Lady.”

He closed the door. Khriss watched for a moment, then turned, nodding toward her own room. Kenton followed, and she shut the door behind them.

“What happened to him?” she demanded.

“I don’t know…” Kenton said slowly, leaning back against the door. “That is the way he used to be, Khriss, before he went to darkside.”

“You mean, he’s serious?” Khriss asked. “I almost thought he was playing a joke on us.”

Kenton shook his head. “I think he’s… given up on himself, in a way. Eric grew up in a very strict home, Khriss. There was always a glint of wildness in him, and I exploited it to its fullest. However, he was always the cautious one in our friendship. You have no idea how many crazy schemes he talked me out of.”

“I’m worried about him,” she confessed. “He used to be so…

happy. A bit irresponsible, but happy."

"And now he'll be the opposite," Kenton said thoughtfully. Was there anything he could do? "I guess we can just wait," he finally said. "Maybe he'll get over it."

"You really think so?" Khriss asked.

Kenton shrugged. "Where Eric is concerned, I really have no idea. Maybe he'll switch back once this is all over, and he can go back to darkside."

Khriss didn't look convinced. She sat on her bunk, a concerned expression on her face. Kenton lay an encouraging hand on her shoulder. Then, not knowing what else to do, he returned to his own room and went to bed.

The voice tried to force its way past Eric's lips, but he refused to let it out. Normal men did not talk to themselves. Besides, he knew it would only call him a fool.

It's better this way, he told himself, climbing onto his bunk. *This is what I was meant to be. This is what I was raised to become. I will be the person everyone wants me to be.*

He barely noticed that he still had the sword in his hand when he lay back to sleep. He held it protectively in front of him, cradling it like a child. He had kept it away from him for so long—it felt good in his hand again. It was part of him, who he was. Who he had always been told he had to be…

Ais frowned as he studied his Kershtian scripture. His mind refused to focus on the holy words before him. He ignored the Lord Mastrell as he entered the room and prepared for bed. Ais had been at his desk reading when the others had confronted Eric, but he had heard the exchange. He wasn't certain to make of the situation.

The man is obviously unstable, Ais thought. *I can't believe he was hiding such ability all that time.* Yet, even as the thought occurred to him, he remembered the time, weeks ago, when Eric had saved him in the alleyway. Neither man had ever spoken of the event—and now Ais realized why. Ais hadn't been the only one revealing secrets that day. Just as Ais had lost control, so had Eric, though their problems manifest themselves in different ways. Neither man wanted to admit what they had become for a short time.

But now he's given in. He has become what he was trying to

hide. Will the same thing happen to me?

It was a horrifying thought. However, Ais knew it was a possibility. These last few days had been wearying. There was a reason he spent so much of his free time seeking solace in the words of the *KerKor*. Now that he didn't have his family to comfort him, it was growing increasingly difficult to control his emotions. Back in the city, when Kenton had been speaking with Vey, Ais had nearly lost control. At first, it had been anger—he had thought the Lord Mastrell was going to attempt blackmail right in front of him. However, Ais's emotions had soon switched to ones of confusion. He didn't understand what the Lord Mastrell had done—it had almost seemed merciful.

Confusion was bad for Ais. Before, when the assassins had attacked, he hadn't been able to make himself go up on deck. No one knew of it, thankfully, but suddenly a horrible, shameful fear had gripped him. He had heard the screaming above, the yells of pain, and had lost control, hiding himself beneath his desk. By the time he had regained control of himself, it had been to late.

The Lord Mastrell had nearly died, and Ais hadn't been there to perform his duty. It was growing worse and worse—never before had he run from a battle. Shame rose to thickly in his chest that he nearly started sobbing. Fortunately, he kept it inside. This time.

What was happening to him? He was falling apart. Always before, the overwhelming emotions had come in the form of anger. This time, they had come as fear, and that worried Ais. What was next? All of his control, his years of learning to keep himself cold and indifferent, seemed useless now. He, a senior trackt, had hidden under a desk during a battle. He wasn't worthy of the position he held, wasn't worthy to bear the Hall's symbol on his uniform.

With an inward groan of agony, Ais forced himself to read the Sand Lord's words. They would bring him peace. They would bring him harmony. The Sand Lord was justice. The sand lord was control.

Kenton frowned, staring up at the cabin's ceiling. Had he just heard a whimper from Ais?

Of course not, you fool, he thought with a chuckle. *The day Ais starts showing emotion…*

Kenton was just on edge. Now he was hearing things—it was

going to be difficult to get to sleep. However, he desperately needed the rest. His body still felt a little weak from overmastery, and he had a lot to do when they got to Kezare.

Ais whimper? Really, Kenton, what were you thinking?

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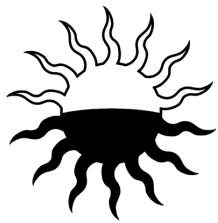

The next day, Kenton woke with the same questions still fresh in his mind. It was as if he had spent the entirety of his dreams brooding over his problems, and as a result was left numb instead of refreshed. He sighed, rolling off the bunk and absently grabbing a handful of sand. He commanded it to life. Nothing happen—

The sand flashed to life. Kenton sat, staring at the sand before him, almost disbelieving. His powers had returned after just three days of waiting. He was a sand master again.

He almost dropped the sand pouch in his eagerness to retrieve another handful of sand. The mastrells had been wrong—he had now proven that fact twice. Overmastery did not burn away one's powers. But, did it really make him stronger? He began to master ribbons, ordering them into the air. When the fourth handful of sand responded to his coaxings, he smiled broadly. After all of his setbacks, his mistakes, and his guessings, he had finally done something right. The fifth ribbon rose into the air as well, though only barely. He wasn't nearly strong enough to get six.

Still, he was engulfed in a flurry of sand. Five ribbons spun according to his will, wrapping around him, filling his vision. He had heard other sand masters speak of the raw power they felt, the heightening of senses, the expansion of the mind, that came from controlling so many ribbons. With one, two, or even three ribbons

his mind had always been dominant. He had used the sand like limbs, moving it like extensions of his arms. Now, however, there was more sand than he should be able to comprehend. He knew, somehow, that he shouldn't be able to command the sand in five different directions at once. Yet he could.

It was as if the sand had its own consciousness—a consciousness that had no form until he gave it direction. However, with the slightest command from him, it moved, seeming to understand his orders without his needing to complete the thought. Holding the sand somehow expanded his mind. The sand itself became his mind—not in a sense of ability to think or reason, but more in the way it processed sensual information. It divided his concentration, allowing his mind to focus on several different tasks at once.

Up until that moment, Kenton had never understood the true potential of sand mastery. With so many ribbons hovering around him, sand mastery became less focused on control or domination. He didn't master the sand so much as he became part of it. One being.

With a groan, Kenton released the sand, falling back on his bunk. The sand showered down against the wooden floor, black and stale. Kenton took a deep breath, suddenly feeling incredibly drained. Dividing his attention in such a way was exhausting. He finally understood why the more powerful sand masters sometimes ran out of energy before they ran out of water. Years of lessons flooded into his mind—lessons he had been forced to sit through year after year while he refused to take a sash.

If he divided his attention too much, he would quickly run out of strength. Instead, he should use his ribbons together, combining them into one or two larger streams. As long as he did this, his sand would function as it had before, just with more power.

Kenton shook his head in amazement. He hadn't listened very well during such lessons, as he had assumed they would never apply to him. Most sand masters never got beyond two or three ribbons—once one hit five or six, he was approaching undermastrell or mastrell level.

Except, Kenton reminded himself, *the mastrells must have all known the truth behind overmastery. That is why they could control two dozen ribbons, while the undermastrells could only*

control six.

Kenton could see how it must have happened. As soon as a student showed the rare ability to master seven or eight ribbons, the mastrells would give him the golden sash. Only then would they reveal the secret, the method of boosting a sand master's power by two or three times. They kept the true strength of sand mastery for themselves. It had been a means of maintaining control over the Diem, and it had worked.

I have to share this, Kenton realized. *The Diem might have lost its mastrells, but with this knowledge I can make even fens powerful.*

Then, however, he paused. He couldn't tell the Diem—not yet. If he failed to protect their Profession, then the sand masters could very well end up mercenaries under Drile's control. Kenton couldn't afford to give them any more power than they already had. Besides, he would have to be very careful how he handled overmastery. One thing the masters had said was true—the process was very dangerous. It had nearly killed Kenton twice now. When he did tell the others about it, he would have to be careful to do it in a very controlled setting.

Still, the success was encouraging. Kenton smiled to himself as he dressed—or, at least, he smiled until he realized something. It wasn't enough. Drile could control twenty-four ribbons—compared to such power, an increase from three to five was negligible. He had increased his power, but he was still ridiculously weak compared to Drile. The realization sliced away much of the euphoria surrounding his success.

Kenton sighed. What had he been expecting? An increase of even two ribbons was supposed to be impossible; had he really thought that he could make himself into a match for Drile in just three days? Yes, Kenton could now control five ribbons, but what good would it do him? Drile had years of experience splitting his consciousness to control multiple ribbons. There was little doubt who would win their contest.

Well, it will just have to be enough, Kenton decided. With five, he might last a little longer. If he had time, he could try overmastering again, but he doubted even that would bring much success. The first time it had happened he had jumped from one

relatively weak ribbon to nearly being able to control four. This overmastery had provided less of an increase—he could barely control that fifth ribbon. He suspected that the amount he gained from overmastery would decrease each time he tried it—otherwise, the mastrells would never have been satisfied with just two dozen.

Khriss drifted on the wisps of her dreams, trying to avoid the inevitability of consciousness. Something was tickling her foot, drawing her out of her peaceful land of restfulness, pulling her toward the real world. She kicked at the annoyance, trying to ignore it. Unfortunately, the more she did so, the more awake she became. Eventually she realized that if someone was tickling her, then someone must have snuck into her room.

She cried out at the indecency of the thought, immediately snapping awake and turning angry eyes at the invader. It turned out to be a shimmering line of sand. Khriss scooted back, pulling the flimsy sheet around her—the pitiful dayside excuse for a bed cover. Her curiosity, however, was more powerful than her indignation, and she refrained from snapping at Kenton. Instead, she watched the sand.

The glowing line, shedding light on the room she had darkened with a cloth over the porthole, came from underneath the door. As she watched, the tip of the snake-like construction moved forward. It almost seemed to feel its way across her bunk, as if it could convey some sense of touch back to its master. Perhaps it could—she'd never considered the possibility before.

The sand drew closer and closer, and Khriss frowned. Finally, she picked up a shoe and threw it against the door. To her satisfaction, she heard Kenton cry out in shock from the other side—he had probably been standing with his ear against the door. As he yelped, the sand fell dead, scattering her bunk and floor with dark sand.

"That hurt!" Kenton's muffled voice exclaimed.

"You deserve it," Khriss snapped back. "You should know better than to violate a lady's privacy!"

She thought she heard a snort from the other side. "You want to see me invade?" he warned. Suddenly, the doorknob began to turn.

Khriss yelped in surprise. He wouldn't dare… yes he would. She hopped out of bed, holding the sheet around her barely-clothed

body as she searched in the now-complete darkness for something to wear. “You’d better not open that door!” she yelled. “I’ve got another shoe!”

She heard chuckling from the other side. The door, however, did not open. *I knew he wouldn’t do it,* Khriss thought with relief.

“Hurry up,” Kenton’s voice chided. “We’re almost to Kezare.”

Khriss didn’t respond. She finally located the porthole, and pulled the cover free. Light assaulted the room, burning into her face. She blinked against it, letting her eyes adjust. Eventually, the light seemed to recede, its raging power subduing slightly when it realized it couldn’t cow her. She was finally getting used to its brightness—it had only taken her a month.

With a sigh, Khriss pulled off her shift and began to wipe herself down with water from the covered basin at the foot of her bed. It was a crude method of washing, but it had to do until she could order herself a proper bath. Afterward she dressed in a light-colored robe with a slight yellow tinge to it, tying it at the waist. She realized that all of the robes she favored were actually men’s robes, but she just couldn’t force herself to wear the atrocities that were women’s clothing on dayside. The baggy, formless robes seemed designed to hide a woman’s form instead of accentuate it—as if being female were somehow shameful.

In a way, she liked how the men’s robes fit her. She could pull them tight at the waist and leave the top open just enough to reveal a hint of bosom. She could see them catching on in Elis, though she would need to add a little more color to them.

She washed her hair as best she could in the basin of water, then combed it straight. The arid dayside heat would soon dry it, though she would have to go up top to make use of the sun. She smiled to herself—perhaps the sun was useful for something after all. Back on darkside, it often took hours to dry her hair. Here she could accomplish the same thing in a few short minutes.

Apparently, she was the last one up. She climbed the steps to find the deck already crowded. Kenton stood conferring with Delious by the bow, Cynder standing a short distance away, looking slightly forlorn. As much as he had complained about Acron, he obviously missed the man’s company.

Eric was on deck as well. He seemed to be competing with Ais to

see who could stand with the stiffest back and flattest expression. Eric's hand rested tensely on the pommel of the sword he now wore at his side—almost like he was worried that someone would try and take it from him. Baon was leaning against the starboard wale, regarding Eric with an interested eye. The large warrior nodded to Khriss as she achieved the deck.

Khriss immediately noticed that Kenton had been wrong—they weren't close to Kezare, they had already arrived. The island city sat right in front of them, and their ship was obviously preparing to dock.

"What happened?" Kenton asked, approaching. "Did you fall into the washing basin."

Khriss snorted, running a hand through her still-wet hair. "You have your sand back?"

Kenton nodded, raising a hand and calling a ribbon to life. He regarded his sand with a look of awe, almost worship. It was the kind of look Khriss had always longed to have a man give to her.

Silly girl, she told herself. *Look at him—he'll never feel that way about you. If Gevin found you annoying, then Kenton certainly must. Shella—he's told you as much a dozen times over!*

"So, how are you going to find the Lord General?" she said, trying to mask her pain and confusion—when had she begun to feel that way about Kenton?

"I don't know," Kenton confessed, letting the sand die as he turned contemplative eyes at the city.

Khriss watched him, wanting to help somehow. What good was she? She didn't speak Lossandin, she didn't know his culture—all she had done was pester him.

Stop it, she told herself. *You've done nothing but feel sorry for yourself since you found the prince. If Kenton gets annoyed with anything, it will be your self-pity. You want to help him. Well, think of something.*

In the end, it was one of Baon's lessons that came to her aid once again. "Kenton," she said slowly, frowning to herself.

"Hum?" he asked, still staring at the city.

"I don't think you have to find the Lord General."

He turned at this, a question on his face.

"I mean, not you personally," Khriss explained. "Why not let the

expert do it?”

“Expert?” he asked. Then he noticed her nodding to the side and followed the gesture with his eyes. Then he smiled.

Ais watched the approaching city, perhaps even more eager than the Lord Mastrell to arrive. He had gone three days without word of Nilto. What would he find when he returned? He feared that the three-day hiatus would turn out to be all the criminal lord needed to finish his preparations and escape. Still, in a way, Ais would be glad to see him go. He would finally be able to bring back his family—this last week without them had been excruciating.

Only one more day, and I will be able to go back to my life, he told himself. *And, in the end, it will be worth it. The Diem will be gone. I will have done both Lossand and the Sand Lord a service.*

“How did you sleep, Ais?” a deceptively kind voice asked.

Ais turned distrustful eyes to find the Lord Mastrell standing behind him, the darksider woman at his side.

“Poorly,” he informed slowly. “What do you want, *Ry’Kensha*?”

“Nothing more than for you to do your job,” Kenton explained.

“I have never been one who likes games, Lord Mastrell,” Ais said. “What do you want of me?”

“Find the Lord General,” Kenton said.

“I’m here to observe you, perhaps protect you,” Ais replied. “I am not here to help you.”

“It doesn’t matter what you’re here to do,” Kenton shot back. “You have a missing Taisha on your hands. Isn’t it your duty to find him? He could be in danger.”

Ais paused. As infuriating as it was, the Lord Mastrell had a point. If the Lord General wasn’t in the Tower, and if he wasn’t with Vey, then something might be wrong.

Kenton smiled, seeing the debate in Ais’s face. “Where do we start?” he asked.

Insufferable sand master, Ais thought. *We’ll see if your smile lasts through tomorrow.* However, out loud he only said two words. “The Tower.”

“Kenton!” The bellow was so loud it could only belong to one person.

Kenton looked across the Tower courtyard to where Gremt was approaching. There was something wrong with the Tower’s

atmosphere. Men still trained in the courtyard, sparring with one another as always. There was a tenseness to their motions, however. They appeared almost formulaic—as if they were putting on a show. The Tower was hiding something, even Kenton could tell that much.

Kenton eyed the tower itself, the large stone structure in front of him. It was two stories tall, and unlike many dayside buildings didn't have many windows. It had been built to be defensible. The two wings on either side housed barracks, the long arm-like structures forming the sides of the courtyard. Most of the Tower's soldiers didn't reside in Kezare, but in garrisons along the borders of Lossand. Though there was relative peace right now, they occasionally suffered raids from the Rim Kingdoms. Lossand might be a desert, but it at least had the river to provide sustenance—the Rim Kingdoms didn't even have that.

Big Head arrived at a quick jog, puffing slightly to himself. The squat man looked worried, though he was trying—unsuccessfully—to cover the emotion. The Tower's soldiers didn't tend to be very good at deceit—perhaps that was why Kenton liked them so much.

"Where is Reegent?" Kenton asked simply.

Gremt tried to smile. "The Lord General? Why, he went south with Lord Vey."

"I just got back from Lraezare, Gremt," Kenton said. "I brought Vey back with me—if Reegent went south on Vey's ship, then he did so as a stowaway, because the Lord Merchant certainly didn't realize he was there."

Gremt grimaced, sweat trickling down his broad face.

"Where is he?" Kenton repeated.

"We don't know," the general finally admitted. "He left without telling anyone. It's not like him, Kenton. We're worried."

"And you didn't tell anyone?" Kenton asked pointedly.

"We didn't want *them* involved," Gremt said, nodding toward Ais.

Kenton sighed. The Tower's soldiers and the Hall's trackts had always resented one another. "This isn't the time for Profession rivalry," Kenton said. "I have to find Reegent before tomorrow or the Diem is lost."

Gremt sighed. "I wish I could help you. None of the *Kelzin* seem

to know anything, though. We can't think where he could have—"

"Show me to his room," Ais said simply, walking over and breaking into the conversation.

Big Head gave the trackt a dark look, but then he sighed, looking back at Kenton. "This way," he said. He led them toward the Tower proper, walking past groups of soldiers, all of whom gave Ais unflattering looks. The trackt ignored them. One other person, however, also had an effect on them—Eric. As soon as the soldiers realized who he was, they began to mumble with each other in low voices.

Kenton followed Gremt into the building, as did the others. Their group had shrunk considerably since their arrival. Khriss had sent Cynder with their things back to darksider town, and both Delious and Vey had gone their separate ways. Baon, as always, followed Khriss, who had insisted on accompanying Kenton to see how well her idea worked. Eric had almost vengefully declared it his 'duty' to protect his 'old friend Kenton' and had come as well. Kenton was beginning to suspect that part of Eric's new persona was an act; a twisted way to make Kenton feel guilty for needing to be rescued. And, if guilt was Eric's intention, then he was being successful.

Worry about that later, Kenton told himself. *One grain at a time.*

Gremt led them through a stone hallway to the Lord General's suite at the back of the Tower. The room was large and expansive, a single large chamber rather than three separate ones like Kenton's own rooms. They were simply decorated—despite his place in society, the Lord General was an austere man. The walls bore several carapace shields and weapons, and there were a few tapestries—remnants from the time Eric's mother had lived her before her death several years before. Eric had never asked after her, even though he had been on darkside when the event happened.

"He was in here," Gremt explained, "resting from his wounds."

"Wounds?" Kenton asked. Then he immediately remembered. "Ah, yes. The sandling."

Gremt nodded. "He didn't like being bedridden, and was constantly hobbling around the Tower. The servants couldn't keep

him in his chambers."

Kenton stood back, regarding the room. Nothing looked unordinary to him—there was a sand mattress in the far corner, a few articles of carapace furniture, and a pitcher of wine on a low table beside the mattress.

Ais, however, wasn't interested in the furniture. He was squatting close to the floor, frowning slightly.

Ais wasn't the Hall's best crime scene investigator, but he had some experience. His own talent lay in organization—he could take a desk-full of information and interpret it, deciphering villains' plans and motives, then plan an operation to stop them. However, every trackt was conversant in standard investigation procedures, and Ais was more competent than most.

Which was why he noticed the sand immediately.

Ais bent down, using his fingernail to scrape a bit of sand from the crack between two floor stones. He frowned as he rubbed the sand between his fingers. Sand couldn't be escaped on dayside—it could generally be found in every crack and every corner of a room. Rarely, however, did one see sand that was black.

Kenton leaned down beside him, regarding the sand. "Sand mastery?" he asked with surprise.

Ais shook his head. As he rubbed the sand, bits of dark material flecked off of it. Dark red material. "Blood," he said.

"What!" the large-headed general exclaimed.

Ais ignored him. Blood, like water or other liquids, would turn sand black. However, the one who had spilt this blood had taken care to clean the floor well. The room didn't even bear its scent. Ais knew the work of professionals when he saw it—it was likely that the Lord General was in serious trouble.

Well, sand master, you were right about one thing, he thought a he stood, looking over the rest of the room. Something else bothered him.

"Why is there no sheet on the sand mattress?" he asked.

The warrior looked over with surprise. "No sheet?" he asked. "I suppose there isn't."

"The Lord General used one, I assume," Ais pressed.

"I think so."

"What kind of sheet was it?" Ais asked simply.

“Why would that matter?” the warrior huffed.

Ais turned, giving him a practiced ‘I know what I’m doing, so kindly stop being an idiot’ look.

The warrior blushed. “It was *ShalRim*, I assume,” he replied. “The Lord General preferred it over darkside materials.”

Ais turned eyes over the room, increasingly worried. *ShalRim* was a smooth, soft material, but it was also incredibly strong. “They probably couldn’t have gotten him out of the Tower,” he said. “There were too many guards. He might still be here somewhere.”

“Where then?” Kenton asked.

Ais frowned, trained instincts leading him along. There was blood on the floor, but not on the mattress. They hadn’t killed him in his sleep, but they had taken him somewhere. They hadn’t made any demands—it wasn’t a kidnapping. Extortion, then? Or, perhaps, interrogation?

“Is there a basement to the tower?” he asked.

Gremt shook his head. “No, not really.”

“Explain,” Ais said.

“Well,” the warrior said, “there is the chilling cellar, for the Lord General’s wine. It’s not used very often…”

“Take me there,” Ais said, nodding toward the door.

The large-headed general obviously didn’t like the idea of taking orders from a trackt, but he did comply, his eyes confused and a little apprehensive. He led them a short distance down another of the Tower’s small hallways. Eventually, he pulled open a small carapace door and nodded toward a set of stairs leading down into darkness. Ais could see why the cellar wasn’t often used—the servants would avoid coming to such a place whenever possible. No daysider, even Ais, could descend into darkness without feeling a touch of claustrophobic fear. Daysiders lived, slept, and worked every day of their lives in direct or near-direct sunlight. Even standing in the well-lit Tower hallway was disconcerting, for there was no window in sight.

“Come on,” Ais said simply, years of training and practice allowing him to squish his fears and emotions behind a stoic trackt’s face. However, even as he said the words, pulling a lantern off the wall, he felt his emotions rising. The darkness was like his own threatening madness, the rage of emotions that hovered just beyond

the light of his consciousness. That first step into gloom, walking down the stairs, nearly caused him to snap.

The following steps were easier, however. The rage was very close—Ais could feel it. It made his hand quiver in fright. He did not let it out. Not this time.

As he made his way down the steps, however, the others following with nervous steps, Ais realized his mistake. The lantern he was carrying sputtered weakly. He should have chosen one stronger. The oil was running out.

Ais froze on the steps, watching the flame begin to die with horror. The were halfway down the stone staircase now, far from the light and freedom above. As the flame flickered, the darkness approached, bringing with it madness. Ais barely had time to look up as the darkness swept over him.

Rage. Pain. Anger. Fear. Madness…

The stairway was suddenly bathed in light. Ais blinked in surprise, his mind completely stunned. Where…?

He turned around slowly to find Kenton wrapped in a shimmering wave of sand. Ais had assumed that never in his life would he be grateful for sand mastery, but at that moment he felt a glimmer of relief. He had been near to snapping.

"I know," Kenton said with a frown, "you hate sand mastery. But honestly, Ais, would you rather stumble around in the dark? Chastise me later."

Ais turned around, giving the Lord Mastrell no sign of just how wrong he had been. They continued down the staircase, which eventually led to a closed carapace door. Ais pushed the door open with an apprehensive hand, worried at what he would find. Unfortunately, this time he was right.

Reegent, Lord General of Lossand, hung tied by strips of *ShalRim* cloth from one of the racks on the far wall. His eyes stared forward blankly, his arms and legs stretched out, his wrists and ankles bloodied from obvious attempts to escape. One leg bore a splint. His face was frozen in a twisted expression of horror.

There were several gasps from behind him, then the Tower soldier pushed his way through to rush to the dead Taisha's side. "My Lord!" he wept, feeling Reegent's neck for a pulse. The look on the man's face, however, had been enough to tell Ais what he

needed to know.

"What's wrong with his eyes?" Kenton whispered, his voice sickened.

Ais stepped forward, gently pushing aside the weeping general. He studied Reegent's dead face closely. "The eyelids have been cut off," he said. There also appeared to be some sort of white mucus around Reegent's cold lips. "He was drugged as well."

"Drugged?" Kenton asked.

"*Kamo*," Ais said. "A Kershtian herb. It heightens emotions—or, in this case, fears."

"You mean?" Kenton said.

Ais nodded. "They tied him up here, in the darkness. Then they drugged him with *Kamo*, cut off his eyelids so he couldn't try to hide from the horrors his mind conjured. Then, I suspect, they lit the candles you see in the corners of the room. There is a different sized pile of wax for each—I would suspect that the candles were each of a different length."

Ais paused, trying to keep the terror out of his voice. He could almost imagine what it would be like… He continued in a whisper. "Reegent was forced to watch as the candles burned away one by one, slowly plunging him further into darkness. The larger the shadows became, the more frenzied his mind became, until he was finally left with no light at all. With two doors and such a long staircase, I doubt there was any chance someone would hear him screaming. The Lord General died trapped beneath his own palace. I suspect that if we check the body, we will find that it didn't die from blood loss or dehydration, but pure terror."

It was a sick, almost demonic thing to do to someone. Ais only knew of one person so evil and demented. But, what reason would Sharezan have to kill the Lord General?

Ais's mind, finding refuge in its analytical side, continued to digest the scene, trying to keep him from focusing on the shadows in his own mind. One thing bothered him. "Why did they break his leg?" he wondered, looking at the splint. "And, when they did, why did they bother to set it afterward?"

Kenton shook his head, looking a little stunned. "They didn't do that," he said absently. "He broke his leg fighting a sandling on the deep sands."

Ais frowned. What was bothering him? What possible reason could Sharezan have to kill Reegent? Usually, Sharezan reserved such horrible punishments for. . .

For those who betrayed him.

Ais's eyes flashed to the leg again. *Reegent would have walked with a limp*, he realized. *What if he was the traitor? What if Reegent was the one who sent me the letter, who tried to meet with me in the old building. I heard the limp, and thought it was Nilto…*

Reegent must have been a member of Shaerezan's network. The Lord General himself, a part of Kezare's criminal underworld. He had probably been an important figure, one extremely dangerous to Sharezan. And, when he had tried to get out, Ais had abandoned him.

Ais closed his eyes in pain, shaking his head slightly. He had been so close. If he had been a little less nervous, a little less stupid, he could have not only saved the Lord General's life, but had a powerful witness against Nilto as well.

I am such an idiot!

Kenton couldn't comprehend doing something so terrible to another human being. What kind of person was capable of such an atrocity? It had been difficult enough to walk down the steps, but to leave a man hanging here, in the darkness to die?

Kenton turned with apprehension. Eric still stood in the doorway, looking at his father's corpse with sad eyes. Then, he close his eyes for a short moment, as if trying to clear the sight from his head. Suddenly, Eric turned away and walked back up the staircase.

Ais had found another lantern and lit it, and a moment later Kenton was able to let most of his ribbons die. His lessons had been right—controlling five ribbons wasn't much different than controlling one, as long as he didn't focus on multiple tasks at once.

"It's so, so…" Khriss's Dynastic voice rang in the small room, despite the quietude of her words.

"I know," Kenton said. She had pulled up beside him, regarding Reegent's corpse with sad eyes.

"Poor Eric," she whispered.

Kenton nodded. Then, in a twisted way, his determined mind forced him to realize something else. Reegent's death was more

than just a blow to the Tower, it was dire problem for the Diem as well. He turned, using a ribbon of sand to light their way as he gently pulled Khriss from the room and began to walk back up to the main floor. Reegent had been one of his most certain votes. Now that he was dead, the Tower's support wasn't so certain. In fact, it looked doubtful. If Kenton remembered correctly, since Reegent left no heir, the other generals would have to vote on a new Lord General. And, unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of the generals of Lossand were *kelzin*—men who would have much to profit from the Diem's destruction. Their one vote could destroy all of Kenton's work over the last two weeks.

There is another way, his mind whispered.

Kenton shook his head. He didn't want to think about that. Unfortunately, he couldn't afford not to. He had too much responsibility, too many people depending on him, to ignore such a possibility. There was another way—a certain way to get the Tower's vote. Kenton stepped through the doorway at the staircase's top. Eric stood a short distance away, hand gripping the hilt of his sheathed sword. He looked up, and met Kenton's eyes.

There was no legal means of disinheritance in Lossand. No matter what Reegent had said, if Eric wanted to claim the Lord Generalship, he could do so. The Law said he had one day to make his claim, otherwise he would lose the opportunity.

Eric and Kenton stared at one another. Eric's eyes seemed to plead with his friend. *Please,* they asked, *please don't ask me.*

Kenton stood uncertainly, the weight of his responsibility constricting his chest. Could he do such a thing? Could he destroy a man who had been his friend, even if his Profession depended on it? Eric's psyche was unstable—Kenton could see Eric's body quivering. The events of the last few days—the return to the sword, and now the sudden death of his father—were almost more than Eric could bear. And now, Kenton found he had to lay another incredible burden on his friend.

I'm sorry, Eric, he realized. *But I have to ask. Too much depends on this vote to pass this opportunity.* He wished to the sands he didn't have to do it.

"Eric," he whispered hoarsely, "will you become Lord General so you can vote for the Diem tomorrow?"

Eric shut his eyes in pain, exhaling sharply, as if he had been punched in the stomach. “Yes,” he whispered back. When he opened his eyes, they were cold. He turned stiffly, and walked away.

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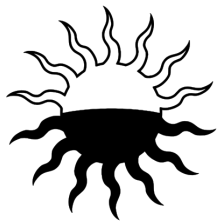

Khriss watched, feeling chilled as Eric left. She hadn't understood their words, but she had felt the tension between them. For a brief moment she thought for certain that Eric would break down into tears. Instead, he had returned to his statuesque emotionless of the days before. Only this time, it had been worse. There had been a vengeful glint in his eyes. What had Kenton said to him?

"Kenton," she whispered. "What is going on?"

Kenton shook his head. "I've just done a very, very bad thing."

"What?"

"I've destroyed a man who was once my friend," he whispered. His eyes looked stunned, as if he couldn't believe what he had just done. He looked down at her, shaking his head slightly. "Why didn't anyone ever warn me the price I would have to pay for being Lord Mastrell?"

Khriss didn't know how to respond. So, she simply too his hand in hers, trying to offer what comfort she could without repeating her disgraceful behavior of before.

Ais climbed up the steps behind them, accompanied by Baon and the dayside general. The trackt said something, and Kenton nodded, replying curtly.

"Kenton," Khriss asked. "What did you say?"

“Ais needs to go back to the Hall to report this,” he said. “I told him to go.”

“No,” Khriss corrected. “I mean to Eric.”

Kenton shook his head. “I asked him to be Lord General. Come on, let’s go back to the Diem. I need to think.”

Kenton pounded the side of the small boat in frustration. They crossed the calm lake-waters, heading toward the Diem, but Kenton’s emotions were not so peaceful. He kept wondering what else he could have done. Was there a way he could have saved Eric? Perhaps he could have waited to see who the *kelzi* chose as a replacement, then tried to make a deal with him. Maybe he could have convinced the Lady Judge that Reegent had supported the Diem, and so his desires should have been a valid vote in Kenton’s favor.

Unfortunately, Kenton realized how contrived—or even silly—most of his other options sounded. In the end, he knew he had made the right decision. The right decision for the Diem, at least. What else could he do? His feelings, and even those of his friends, were secondary when it came to protecting those under his charge. He hadn’t asked Eric to do anything inherently wrong or immoral; many would argue that he had done Eric a favor.

But, Kenton doubted that was the case. He had watched Eric over these last few weeks, and had come to realize the missasumptions of his childhood. He hadn’t ever really known Eric—he had know the fake Eric, the Eric that Reegent had created. Eric’s true personality had been hidden. And, Kenton realized, he liked the real Eric better. He was a bit more contrary and a lot more irresponsible, but perhaps responsibility wasn’t for everyone. Eric had a kind of unhinged optimism that had been helpful in its own way.

Kenton had killed that Eric. He had seen the coldness in the this Eric’s eyes—the despair. It had been the hopeless despair of a man resigned to his course. Kenton feared that he might never see the real Eric again.

This had better be worth it, he thought bitterly. *I didn’t ask to be Lord Mastrell, but I have done my best.*

The boat pulled into a shoreside dock, and they began to climb out. As they did so, Baon caught Kenton’s eye. The warrior looked…

unsettled.

"Is something bothering you, Baon?" Kenton asked with a frown.

"The murder," Baon said. "No one thought to ask why this Lord General was killed."

Kenton shrugged. "That is for the trackts to determine," he said. "I doubt it has anything to do with us."

"Can you be certain?" Baon asked.

"What do you mean?"

"It was very convenient for your enemies that one of your strongest supporters was murdered the day before the vote," Baon explained.

Kenton paused. "The Kershtians wouldn't do that," he guessed. "Their vendetta is with me. I don't think it would be morally acceptable for them to randomly start killing my supporters."

"Are you certain they think that way?" Baon asked pointedly. "Because, honestly sand master, if I were your enemy, those Taisha would be the first people I went after. Kill enough of them, and they'll learn not to support the Diem."

"I'm certain Ais has considered that possibility, Baon," Kenton said.

"How certain?" Baon replied. "Even the best men make oversights, sand master."

Kenton frowned. There wasn't a good possibility of it—even the A'Kar's assassins would be hesitant to start murdering Taishin. At least, any that weren't sand masters. But, there was a possibility. Delious, Rite, and the others could be in danger.

"You head back to the Diem," he said to the others, waving for the boatman not to leave. "I'll go and see what Ais thinks."

Ais opened the door to his chambers with a sigh. The Lady Judge had immediately assigned a team to investigate Reegent's death—and, just as immediately, she had told Ais that the matter was no longer his concern. He was to head back to the Lord Mastrell as soon as he filled out a report detailing everything he had seen that had led him to find the Lord General's body.

He sat down at the desk, rifling through several stacks of dark paper to find the right form. He had barely started, however, when a frantic knock came at his door.

"Yes?" he asked with a frown, standing.

Tain pushed open the door. “Ais!” he exclaimed. “I can’t believe you’re back.”

“What is it, Tain?” he asked.

“It’s Sharezan, sir!” the man exclaimed. “We found him!”

“What?” Ais exclaimed with surprise.

“You weren’t here, sir,” Tain explained, “so I organized the raid myself. We’re about ready to move—several teams are already in position. When we heard you were back, we decided to wait and see if you wanted to join the raid. I know you have a personal interest in this one, sir.”

Ais looked down at the stacks of paper, then dropped the form and stood. “Let’s go,” he said, feeling eagerness rise in his chest.

Tain and he rushed from the Hall, Ais in a stupor of excitement. After all this time! “You did well, Tain. I have always been impressed with your thoroughness. How did you do it?”

“It was Lokmlen,” Tain explained. “The man you caught two weeks ago. He finally broke and told us where Shaerezan’s safehouse is. We’ve got him cornered. We kept the entire operation secret, even from the rest of the Hall. We didn’t want Sharezan to hear.”

Ais allowed himself a slight smile. The Lady Judge must have known about the operation, but she hadn’t said anything. She didn’t want him going on the raid. But, because she hadn’t mentioned it, she also hadn’t ordered him not to go. The Lord Mastrell could do without him for a short time.

Tain handed Ais a *zinkall*, which he strapped on as they made their way into the merchant district of Kezare. Here, there were large buildings used for storage. Tain led him toward one of them. “The squad is in here,” he said, motioning furtively toward an open door.

Ais followed him through the door and into a large, darkened room. A few insufficient windows shed light down toward the floor, creating spots of illumination on the empty ground. Ais stepped forward hesitantly, searching for signs of occupation. He didn’t seen any trackts. However, at that moment, he heard something. He looked up with surprise, seeing a form moving in the shadows on a second floor catwalk.

“Tain, we’ve been betrayed!” Ais hissed turning toward the

door.

The exit shut suddenly. “Yes,” Tain’s voice sad, “you have.”

Ais turned slowly. Tain stood in a spot of light a short distance away. Several armed men were walking out of the shadows to join him. Ais recognized one of their faces—Lokmlen.

“You sold yourself to them,” he hissed at Tain.

“No, actually,” Tain said conversationally, his arms clasped behind his back. Then Ais noticed something—the other men in the room, they were standing around Tain deferentially. Almost as if… he were in charge.

“You?” Ais asked incredulously.

Tain smiled, nodding his head slightly. “What better cover for a criminal, Ais, then as a trackt? The identity has served me well over the years.”

Ais sat stupefied. All of his plans and operations—Sharezan had been privy to them the entire time. The very man he had been searching for all these years had been a member of his personal band. Of course, it made sense, in a way. He had always thought that Sharezan moved too quickly in response to Ais’s attacks.

“*Aisha!*” Ais cursed.

“Indeed,” Tain agreed.

“You knew about everything,” Ais said.

“I did,” Tain said. “Of course, sometimes you moved too quickly even for me to do anything. You really do have an… energetic mind, Ais.”

“And I always thought you would turn out to be Nilto,” Ais mumbled.

“Nilto?” Tain asked with surprise. “That is the one you suspected? Amazing—I should have seen it. We all knew that you had your suspicions, but no one could pry them out of you. I tried for years—it would have been very convenient to know. I would have gladly have framed Nilto for you, had I known that he was the one you suspected.”

“And the threats on my family…” Ais said, still dumbfounded. Tain had sent them all. In fact, Ais remembered with a curse, Tain had been at the Diem both days notes had been delivered through Kenton. He should have seen, he should have suspected…

“I have to say, Ais,” Tain said, walking slowly, his hands still

clasped behind his back, “even knowing everything you are going to do, it has been difficult to stay ahead of you. No matter what I did, you slowly chipped away at my empire. And now, I barely have anything left.”

“You are a monster,” Ais mumbled. Tain had a gleam in his eye—a dangerous, insane gleam. Ais had seen the same look in his own eyes. “What you did to the Lord General…”

“You liked that?” Tain asked, looking up with a smile. “It was one of my better projects. Reegent has always had a horrible fear of darkness; he was even worse than the rest of us. Once you know a man’s weakness, well, the rest of the project just sort of builds itself, doesn’t it?”

Tain continued to walk. He paused a few feet in front of Ais. “You’ve nearly destroyed me, Ais,” he confessed. “You’ve done so well, in fact, that I’ve decided to accept my losses and take a little time off. Only a few years, of course.” Suddenly his eyes turned hard. “I would rather not have to deal with you when I return.”

Ais set his jaw, staring Tain proudly in the eyes. Whatever Tain did, Ais knew he had won. He had driven the criminal overlord of Kezare to bury himself like a frightened tonk. “Kill me then,” he said.

Tain smiled. “Oh, no, Ais. I’ve been planning your project for some time now. I was half-afraid I would never get to use it. I considered killing you a dozen different times, but I always knew that was the wrong choice. It was far better to have one trackt chasing me, even a superior one like yourself, than to enrage the entire Hall. You, at least, I could watch.” Tain paused. “Now, however, I have to leave anyway. My cover is ruined. The only blessing in this is that I can finally do to you as I have always dreamed.”

Ais began to get nervous. *Oh, Ker’Naisha, please just let him kill me.*

“Every man has at least one line of instability, Ais,” Tain said, continuing to pace. “It has long been a study of mine to look at these flaws. They are what makes us unique, but at the same time they are our greatest weaknesses. Like the cleavage point of a fine gem, even the slightest pressure to one of these faults is enough to make us shatter.” Tain turned chilling, intense eyes on Ais. “I have

become quite good at making men shatter, Ais.

"With you, it is easy. We all know about your instability—the entire Hall knows. Ais, the man who keeps his emotions wound so tightly, when they come out, they explode. Most of them pity you, in one way or another."

Ais ground his teeth, careful to keep himself in control. This man would not get the better of him. He wouldn't give Sharezan the satisfaction.

"What most of them don't know, Ais, is what it is that makes you so unstable."

Ais froze. Tain was smiling broadly now.

"It's the conflict, Ais," Tain explained. "Are you a trackt, or are you a Kershtian? Are you a believer, or a sinner?" Tain paused. "Are you a cold-hearted warrior, or a loving father."

Ais hissed. "No," he whispered.

"I've been taking good care of them, Ais, don't worry," Tain defended. "But, unfortunately things have to change. You see, Ais, I know exactly where your point of instability is. I'm going to have to tap it ever so gently."

"No!" Ais screamed.

Tain smiled. Ais shot him.

The *zinkall,* however, only let loose a hiss of pressure. The arrow didn't fire.

"Never accept a weapon from someone you don't trust, Ais," Tain warned. "Oh, wait. You did trust me. Never mind, then." The former trackt turned to Lokmlen, and the man nodded, walking into the darkness. Ais heard a door open and shut off to the side.

"Now, as for our project," Tain said. "Lokmlen has affably agreed to take part in our little experiment. He has set up a firetrap at a local building—an orphanage, I believe. They always make the best targets—everyone gets so emotional, yet none of them are really upset to see the poor children go. You were raised in an orphanage, weren't you Ais?"

Ais didn't respond. he was feeling his rage begin to build, feeling his control begin to slip. *No… this isn't happening…*

"Anyway," Tain continued. "Lokmlen is going to set the firetrap off himself. Dozens will die—perhaps hundreds, if the fire gets out of control. You may follow him, if you wish. I'll even tell you where

he's going. It is the same orphanage you were raised in—the one on the east side of the market. You can also try and find another trackt, or someone else to try and stop him. But, you know, I doubt you'll be able to let yourself do that. You always have been so avid about maintaining control; you never let anyone else do anything."

Ais ground his teeth. He could feel his body shaking.

"Now," Tain said, looking Ais straight in the eye. "I am going to go kill your daughter. You may follow me and try to stop me if you wish. That is your decision, Ais—duty or family. Do you save the hundreds you don't know, or the one that you love? I would choose quickly, if I were you. You may leave in one minute."

Tain turned, and walked toward the back of the room. Ais screamed and threw himself toward the man, but strong hands held him back.

"No fair cheating, Ais," Tain warned. "You have one minute to contemplate your decision."

And he left.

Ais struggled against those gripping him, but he couldn't see them. His vision was growing dark and red, and there was a powerful rushing sound in his ears. The rage of emotions came upon him all at once. He laughed hysterically and sobbed in pain at the same time.

Unfortunately, he retained just enough of his consciousness to remember the choice before him. He battled against it, for once welcoming the loss of control. Maybe if the emotions took him, he wouldn't have to choose. He wouldn't have to make such a terrible, terrible choice.

The hands released him, but he stood frozen in paradox. He slumped to the ground, wailing in torment. But still, he couldn't avoid it. Duty loomed before him. His daughter or hundreds of others? If he wasted time, all of them would die. He couldn't think. He couldn't plan.

And so, with a cry of dismay, Ais crawled to his feet and stumbled toward the door. The door Lokmlen had taken.

Outside, he was confronted by the light. The sun shone down on him with dissatisfaction. Ais could feel the Sand Lord's vengeful heat pushing down on him, crushing him beneath its power. Still, he struggled on.

The area was relatively unpopulated, and passers-by shied away from Ais, frightened by the wild uncontrol they saw in his face. He pushed his way through them, heading east. He had to find another trackt. Somewhere, there was someone who would help him. Then he could turn back and go after Tain.

Sand Lord take them! Ais cursed to himself, feeling the tears streaming down his cheeks. *Where are all the trackts! They should be patrolling. They should be…*

He stumbled through an alley and onto a street running to Portside. Here, he caused quite a stir. The crowds began to stare, fear and curiosity in their eyes. Ais pushed through them, his hands like ragged claws. Where were the trackts?

"Step aside!"

The voice was like a blurred mumble in Ais's ears, but he turned toward it, some part of his increasingly feral mind recognizing the authority he heard therein. A trackt, tall and Lossandin with a frown on his face, shoved his way to the front of the crowd. He saw Ais, and his face grew amazed.

"Senior Ais!" he exclaimed. "Are you wounded?"

Ais stumbled toward him, grabbing the front of the man's uniform in shaking hands. "Go!" he hissed.

The man's eyes opened wide. "Senior Ais?" he asked. "What is going on?"

Ais tried to speak, but his mind was too clouded, his words too slurred. His voice came out like a croak. He watched the man with despair, trying to force the words through his mouth. Unfortunately, all he could think of was little Melly. He had abandoned her. He was a horrible person. He was a horrible trackt. How had he deluded himself all these years? How had he dared marry, and pull innocents into the void that was Ais?

He groaned. Another trackt had joined the first, and he caught Ais as he began to slip toward the ground. The two men were talking worriedly with one another—Ais had lost the ability to understand what they were saying.

What have I done?

The trackts began to push their way through the people, towing Ais in the direction of the Hall. He let them tow him, his mind a whirling tempest of pain, humiliation, and guilt.

No! A piece of him wailed.

Faces stared down at him, their eyes amazed. Was this really senior trackt Ais? The man respected across Kezare, the model of control and strength?

No!

A man with no sense of duty. A man who failed when the lives of others were in danger. A disgrace of a trackt.

No!

The sun stared down at him. Powerful, always in control. He stared up at its warmth. Poor, pathetic Ais. Control didn't matter. Reputation didn't matter. Lives did matter.

Rise.

"No!" Ais yelled, pushing himself out of the trackts's grip. He stumbled to his feet and grabbed the nearest one, pulling him close.

"The orphanage on east side, the one next to the sandling pens. It's in danger. Look for a firebomb. Go!"

The man stumbled back as Ais released him. He stared at Ais with confused eyes. A second later, however, he saluted and rushed away. The second man stood for a moment beneath Ais's commanding glare then followed him.

Ais turned to the west, feeling his body grow numb. He had to go on. He was too late, he knew. He had wasted too much time, but he had to go on. Instinctively, he knew where Tain would be. Where Melly would be. He had studied Sharezan so long that he understood the man's mind.

With shuffling, barely controlled feet, Ais began to stumble toward his own house.

Ais had regained much of his control by the time he reached his home street. The rage and fear were gone—for once, he had actually pushed them back. He knew the victory was a fleeting one, however. The guilt and despair he felt were growing far more powerful than the rage ever had been. He had done his duty, but he had failed his family. It had taken too long. He knew what he would find inside his house, and he was afraid of what it would do to him.

He rushed forward, wishing he could run and hide, wishing he wouldn't have to see what he would find inside his home. The squat building appeared as he rounded a corner. Quiet, dead. The door was slightly open.

I don't want to see! Ais thought with despair. His legs, however, continued to pull him forward.

He wandered toward his home, mindless, barely seeing the buildings and people around him. He walked up the steps on stiff legs. He knew what he would see. He pushed open the door anyway.

The room was sprayed with blood. It pooled on the floor, droplets of it scattered across the walls. Destruction. And there, in the direct center of the floor, was the body.

Tain's body. A small pile of black sand sat on his chest.

"Ais?" a voice asked.

Ais turned stunned eyes upward. Kenton strode from the back bedroom, glowing and white, like the sun itself, brilliant cloak flapping behind him. In his arms he held a small form. She was frightened, her eyes wide with fear, but she was alive.

Melly cried out when she saw Ais. Kenton carried her forward and put her down. Ais's legs gave out. He slumped to his knees, wrapping his arms around his daughter and burying his head in her hair, weeping shamelessly.

Kenton stood with confusion.

"How, sand master," Ais whispered. "How?"

"I came looking for you," Kenton explained. "You weren't at the Hall, so I came here; I remembered it from the time we went to meet that man who you thought would betray Sharezan. No one was home, so I left. But, as I was leaving, I saw someone coming down the street with a large sack. Something about him made me suspicious—he had a trackt's uniform on, and the sack looked suspicious. So, I watched. He opened the door to your house and came in, and I followed."

Ais continued to hold the girl—his daughter. That fact alone had stupefied Kenton. Ais had a family?

"Who was he, Ais?" Kenton asked. "He attacked me as soon as I entered. I thought he was another assassin, and I killed him with barely a thought—I assumed my sand would just bounce off him, like the others. Then I found the girl in the sack."

Ais didn't answer the question, he just continued to rock back and forth, holding the girl, crying openly.

"Thank you, sand master," Ais whispered. "Thank you."

Kenton nodded. He wasn't certain how to react—he felt like he was intruding on something. He didn't leave, however. Ais had protected him a number of times—he owed it to the trackt to help him if necessary.

Kenton returned to the Diem a few hours later, tired from his exertions. He had stayed and talked with Ais for some time. Apparently, the man Kenton had killed had been none other than Sharezan—the one who had killed the Lord General.

Once he had assured himself that Ais wasn't in any more danger, Kenton had gone to visit the Hall and asked them to prepare some legal documents for him to sign. Whatever happened in the day to come, he wanted his promises to the other Taishin to be firm. Because of those documents, the Lord Mastrell—whomever he may be—would be forced to deliver sand master workers to the Draft and the Tower.

The Diem was quiet as he walked through the entry hall and into the courtyard. Kenton frowned, checking the moon. He hadn't realized how late it was—he barely had time to get some sleep before… before the next day. His eyes shot uncomfortably toward the Pit. It sat like a large stone, immovable. No matter how much Kenton pushed, he wouldn't be able to avoid it.

He had almost forgotten about the duel in the day's excitement. Now, however, his nervousness returned. In a few short hours he would face Drile. In a few short hours it would all be over. The attack that had begun with a single arrow through Praxton's chest would end with a death by sand.

Suddenly, Kenton wished he had been raised a religious man. The *Ker'reen* would never have accepted him, he knew, but he wished he had something. Some sort of knowledge that there was goodness in the world, a force that would recognize what he had done and bless the contest. He feared that without some supernatural help, he was certainly doomed. Drile's power was incomprehensible.

He turned toward his room, raising himself to the balcony with his sand. He didn't know if there was something out there more powerful than man, but he said a silent prayer to it anyway. It couldn't hurt.

With that he made his way to his sleeping room and lay down

on the sand mattress, letting his tired body rest.

Tomorrow it will all be over.

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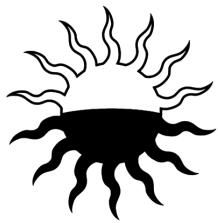

Khriss had never seen the Diem so busy. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people milled through its halls, pushing toward its courtyard. Most of them wore the bright robes of *kelzin*. They spoke with one another eagerly, and Khriss could feel their excitement.

Khriss watched them distastefully. They had probably never been to the Diem in their lives. They cared little for the sand masters or their leader—they only knew that the duel wasn't an event to be missed. To them, it was a social occasion. A twisted sport of some kind. They were no better than… well, Elisian nobles.

She stood with Cynder, Baon, and N'Teese, uncertain how to even get into the building. It was even busier than the marketplace. Baon, however, took one look at the crowd and began walking to the right. Khriss followed with a frown. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"Never use the front door, duchess," Baon said, pointing to another opening on the right side of the building. There was no crowd there.

Through the side entrance they were able to make their way to the courtyard. It soon became evident, however, that reaching the building in the center—the Pit, as Kenton called it—would prove more difficult. People were trying to crowd their way through its small door. A couple of trackts stood at the entrance, keeping them

back.

Suddenly, the crowd grew quiet. Khriss followed their stares, noting a figure standing on a third floor balcony. It wasn't Kenton, but a handsome man with firm features and dark brown hair. He called sand around himself, and for the first time Khriss realized what Kenton meant when he said he lacked power.

Drile could control so much sand that he looked like a glowing sandstorm. Khriss could barely see his form in the middle of the vortex—sand streaked out like wild bolts of electricity, flipping and spinning around him. He dropped to the bottom floor, and immediately the crowd pulled away tensely. The walking hurricane moved forward, and people scattered before him. The trackts stepped aside, letting him into the Pit.

Such power! Khriss though with amazement. Drile's movement had created its own wind, blowing sand across the entire courtyard and into the eyes of the *kelzin*. Even from a distance Khriss had felt a sort of electrical energy from the man, and it had made her skin feel chilled, her hair stand on end.

Kenton, what were you thinking? She thought incredulously. *This is the man you're going to fight?*

Kenton watched Drile's performance with a frown. He waited for some sarcastic comment from Eric, but none came. He almost looked to the side before remembering that Eric wasn't there any more. He stood alone in his rooms.

So lonely, he thought with a shake of his head. He had sent Dirin away and turned Eric against him. How had his father been able to stand it, living in these huge rooms by himself? No one to share his life? No friends, no family?

Immediately, Kenton's eyes fell on the crowd below. Had she come? Yes, she had. He saw Baon's unmistakable black-skinned form standing near the south entrance. Kenton almost wished Khriss had decided not to watch the fight. He didn't want her to see what would happen to him.

Well, there is no use in putting it off, Kenton told himself. His hand was shaking slightly as he reached out for his sand and called it to life. The crowd looked up at him, but they weren't nearly as awed by his descent as they were by Drile's. His five ribbons looked weak, almost insignificant, compared to Drile's sheer power.

Still, the crowd pulled back from him, and he sent a ribbon to the side, using it to clear a path for Khriss and the others. The crowd moved back from the sand—they had come to see him die, but they still didn't trust sand mastery.

Khriss followed the line of sand, her eyes mournful as she came within a few steps of Kenton. *So, you finally realized, did you?* Kenton thought. He tried to smile as she reached him, but it came out as a grimace.

"Kenton…" she said. Then she gave him a quiet hug—a desperate hug.

"I'll be fine," he mumbled unconvincingly.

A hand fell on his shoulder. He turned to find Baon looking down at him.

"It takes a true warrior to fight a battle he knows he cannot win," the soldier explained. "Sometimes, the good our fighting does is its own victory. You have my respect, sand master."

Kenton nodded, trying to keep that sentiment foremost in his mind. *I will not die for nothing,* he told himself. *My life was traded for stability. If I hadn't stopped Drile, the Diem would never have had a chance.*

He turned to regard the Pit. The crowd stood to either side, pulling away to form a path to the building. *Well, let's at least make a good show of it,* Kenton thought, turning to stride determinedly toward the Pit.

The trackts let him pass, and he walked into the room. The benches were filled with sand masters and *kelzin*. Apparently, because of Kenton hadn't responded to the requests for seats, the *kelzin* had simply decided that those who had seats in the Hall to watch trials also deserved seats to watch the fight. As a result, the hundred or so who had managed to get places in the Pit were among the most powerful, rich, and influential people in Lossand. They clapped sporadically as Kenton entered, as if he were some sort of performer.

The rest of the Pit was filled with sand masters. There were perhaps three hundred seats surrounding the sand below, and every one had a body in it—with one small exception. A group of trackts held a line of seats near the front—a place for the Taishin. They would have a very good view of the fight.

“I had no idea I was so popular,” Kenton mumbled, looking over the crowd. He turned to Khriss. “Are you sure you want to watch this?” he asked.

She nodded.

“It might be… gruesome,” Kenton warned.

“I have to be here, Kenton,” she insisted, looking into his eyes.

He nodded slowly. He turned eyes on the crowd again and selected a group of several *kelzin* who didn’t look too important. He sent a ribbon of sand to tap one of them on the shoulder. The man turned with a start.

“You four,” Kenton said. “Out.”

“But!” the man argued.

“Out!” Kenton snapped, somewhat annoyed at these *kelzin* who had come to watch his execution. “The Duchess Khrissalla of Elis needs a seat.”

The man blushed, but there was little he could do. He rose, shooting Kenton a hateful look, and let his companions from the room. Kenton nodded toward the seats. Khriss gave him one last hug, then led the other three as they made their way down to the seats.

Kenton’s own place was in the Pit itself. A six foot high stone wall was all that separated the contestants from the viewers on the benches above, but there really wasn’t any danger to them. Mastered sand was under precise control. That was why it was so deadly.

Kenton sighed, trying to clear his mind from such pessimistic thoughts as he made his way down to the pit.

Ais knocked respectfully on the Lady Judge’s door. He wore his trackt’s uniform, but he knew he would never be able to look at it, or himself, the same way again. He had disgraced the Hall. He had tried to hide his weakness from the others, but now he knew that the only one he had been fooling was himself.

“Come in,” the Lady Judge’s voice came.

Ais took a deep breath, then pushed open the door. He bowed, then stood stiffly, waiting to be addressed.

Heelis wore her formal black robes. Several attendants were hurriedly preparing for her departure—like the other Taishin, she intended to watch the fight between the two sand masters.

“Senior Ais,” she said, looking up. “I had expected you would spend the next few hours with your family.”

Ais continued to stand with a stiff posture. “My Lady,” he said. “I have a request.”

“Yes, Ais?”

“I wish to resign my place as a senior trackt,” he said. “I am leaving the Hall.”

Heelis frowned. “That is a disappointment, Ais,” she said. “Can there be no reconciliation?”

“I am afraid not, My Lady,” Ais said. The admission hurt, but he had only himself to blame for its necessity. He could not continue as a trackt, not after what he had done… what he had revealed himself to be.

“Running won’t help, Ais,” Lady Heelis warned. “You have to face your problems someday.”

“I will face them, My Lady. But I must do so in a place where I am not a liability to others.”

Heelis regarded him for a moment, then nodded slightly. “I trust your judgement, Ais. You may do as you see necessary. However, I must make one request. I need you to remain a trackt for one more day—or, at least, until the Council meeting in a few hours.”

Ais nodded. She would probably have him testify during the Diem’s trial. “As you wish, My Lady,” he agreed.

Heelis nodded, then motioned for her aids to join her as she began to walk from the room. As she moved, Ais noticed something. There was a stack of folded papers on her desk that looked suspiciously like the reports he had given her each day for the last two weeks—the reports he had prepared about the Lord Mastrell’s activities. They were all still sealed. Why hadn’t she read them?

“You should come with me to the battle, Ais,” she suggested.

“No thank you, My Lady,” he said, turning away from the reports. “I have little taste for such morbid sport.”

“I agree, Ais,” Lady Heelis responded. “However, it is rare that one has an opportunity to see sand masters work. For the good of Lossand, I think it necessary to find out what they are capable of when their lives are in danger.”

Ais paused. He had seen Kenton fight several times now, and he understood the Lady Judge’s point. Many in Lossand

underestimated the sand masters's power.

"Have you no desire to see how young Kenton fares?" Heelis asked, moving out of the room. Ais followed. "You've been travelling with him for two weeks now."

"He is a sand master," Ais said simply. "I care nothing for him." Yet, for some reason, he found himself following Heelis.

Ais paused once they left the Hall, standing in front of the carriage that had been brought to transport her to the docks. His wife had arrived in the city a few hours before, distraught because of her daughter's sudden disappearance. She and Melly were now staying with Mellis's parents, and both had been sleeping when Ais left. He did have an odd curiosity to see what happened to Kenton—for a purely intellectual reason, of course.

Heelis raised an eyebrow as Ais decided to join her in the carriage, but she didn't say anything to him. She simply ordered the driver to take them to the docks.

The Taishin were the last ones to arrive. The new Lord Admiral came first, accompanied by Delious. A few moments later Vey and the Lord Farmer made their appearance, both dressed in bright violet robes. The two Kershtians made their way down to their places, speaking quietly with some of the *kelzin* they passed. Kenton stood at the bottom of the Pit, his bare feet touching the sand as he tried to prepare himself for the battle to come. He watched with discomfort as Eric arrived, wearing the formal red of the Lord General. Kenton had half-feared that his friend would disappear for another three years. His uniform, however, meant that he had actually claimed the Lord Generalship. Eric's cold, almost lifeless eyes focused on Kenton as he made his way to his seat.

Next came the Lord Artisan. Rite's stern, simple face was disturbed as he entered the building. From what Kenton heard, the man had nearly decided not to come to the fight. Social pressures, however, had persuaded him to attend the event. Kenton was almost disappointed—in his opinion, the fewer people who saw him get slaughtered the better.

Finally, the Lady Judge arrived, accompanied by a group of dark-clothed trackts and aids. She left the trackts to stand in the shadows above, and swept down the stairs to her place, moving with the grace of a woman half her age. Her aged eyes, however,

held every bit of wisdom earned during her seven decades of life. She took her place, regarding Kenton with an unreadable look.

That's all of them. Kenton thought. The saddest part about it all, he decided, would be that he would die before they voted. He would never know if his efforts had managed to save the Diem or not.

Kenton took a deep breath, preparing himself as best he could. Drile stood at the other end of the forty-foot wide pit, conferring with several sand masters. He wore his white robes tied with the customary black cord. As the Lady Judge took her place he turned, smiling, and nodded to Elorin, who sat at the front of the sand masters.

Elorin looked to Kenton. Kenton nodded as well. He was ready.

Elorin stood, looking over the crowd. He looked nervous, but he had a right to be. Sand Masters hadn't fought one another for centuries. Elorin hadn't looked too eager when Kenton had asked him to mediate the ceremony.

"My Lords and Lady Taishin, people of Lossand. You have come to witness a very serious event. These two sand masters, unable to resolve their difficulties, have come to face one another in single combat. May we—"

Elorin paused as a commotion stirred at the back of the room. Kenton turned, and was surprised to see a tall form with bright red hair walk into the room. He wore the dark brown robes of a Talloner. *The Lord Mason's emissary,* Kenton realized. *So Dirin failed.* The realization hurt—Kenton had been intentionally avoiding thinking about of Dirin's mission. Now he would die knowing he had failed.

However, even as the thought occurred to him, Kenton saw another, smaller form push its way into the room. This form also had red hair, and it wore the white robes of a sand master. Dirin smiled encouragingly at Kenton as the Talloner emissary took his place with the Taishin. Dirin's optimism gave him hope—perhaps the boy had succeeded after all. Of course, Dirin would be optimistic no matter what happened, so perhaps the boy's smile wasn't a good way to judge.

Regardless, Elorin continued his speech, so Kenton didn't have time to give the matter further thought.

“May we be witnesses to the victor, and mourners for the loser,” Elorin announced. “May we avoid this day in the future. Sand masters, you may begin.”

Elorin sat down.

Kenton took a deep breath, his body suddenly tense as he reached for his sand pouch. His hand never got there.

Sand exploded around Drile, rising into the air like a mythical many-armed beast. Twenty-five ribbons screamed toward Kenton. They didn’t cut him; instead, they picked him up and slammed him back against the Pit’s stone wall. Kenton both heard and felt something crack inside his chest. He gasped in pain, dropping to the ground as Drile withdrew his sand.

Kenton lay curled on the sandy ground, his body throbbing, his eyes wide with amazement. The pain was more sharp than he could have imagined. He rolled over with a groan, trying to regain control of himself. Drile stood at his end of the pit, smiling, his sand writhing around him like two-dozen whips of glowing smoke. Eventually, Kenton made it to his knees, then back to his feet. In one hand he clutched a handful of sand.

He cried out in anger and pain, bringing the sand to life with a flash. Drile didn’t respond as Kenton gathered his sand around him, though he did raise an eyebrow in surprise as he counted Kenton’s ribbons.

His teeth gritted against the pain, Kenton launched an attack of his own.

Five ribbons crossed the area between the two men. Kenton expanded his mind, moving each ribbon independently as it wove toward Drile. When the ribbons were just a few feet from his enemy, Drile’s ribbons suddenly responded. They snapped forward like predators, no less than three ribbons striking each of Kenton’s. Sand sprayed across the pit as ribbons met. Kenton tried to keep his ribbons free from Drile’s defense, but it was to no avail. There were too many ribbons, and Drile was too practiced. Even Kenton’s superior ability to control barely helped in the face of such odds.

Each of Kenton attacks fell dead as Drile’s ribbons touched them. Kenton did manage to reciprocate, touching the tip of his ribbons to two of Drile’s, making them fall dead.

Unfortunately, he was quickly overwhelmed. He pulled back,

regrowing his ribbons around him. His eyes were already beginning to burn—he had expended an amazing amount of water in the attack. His body was feeling weak as well. Drile, however, was unfazed. None of Kenton's ribbons had gotten within a few feet of his body.

This is hopeless, Kenton thought with pain. Of course, he had always known that it would be.

Drile attacked. The ribbons whipped and spun, streaking toward Kenton. Kenton pulled back reflexively before them, pushing against the stone wall. He focused himself, ordering his sand to protect him.

His five ribbons rose to his defense, attacking Drile's ribbons. He managed to intercept several of them, smashing through their centers, dropping the ribbons dead to the floor. Unfortunately, the attempt was laughably insufficient. Fifteen ribbons still made it to him.

The sand slicked into his body without mercy. He felt his shirt get ripped from his body, a dozen ribbons cutting into his flesh. Pain erupted through his body, and blood splashed against the wall, dripping down to the sand. *Kelzin* cried out in surprise and horror, but Kenton only groaned, his eyes shutting against the agony.

He felt pain from his chest, arms, and legs. However, for some reason he was still alive. Drile hadn't pierced him with the sand, he had only cut and sliced, lacerating Kenton's flesh with painful, but not fatal, wounds.

Drile was laughing again. He had avoided delivering a death blow on purpose. Kenton opened his eyes, barely able to keep himself conscious. He was on the ground again, white sand sticking to his blood-stained body. There were slices on his chest and arms, like lashes from a whip.

I didn't even hurt him, Kenton thought with shame. *I lasted a few brief minutes.* He looked across the Pit, his eyes seeking out Khriss in the crowd. She seemed terrified. Her eyes were wide, tears streaming down her cheeks. Poor girl.

With a sigh, Kenton pushed himself to his knees again. *I won't let him beat me so easily!*

"This is horrible!" Khriss said, trying to stand, trying to do something. A firm hand held her down.

“Yes,” Baon said quietly, “it is horrible. However, it is not your place to interfere, duchess.”

“He’ll die!” Khriss said, her mind finally grasping what that fact meant. Kenton couldn’t die. She needed him. She didn’t know why, but she did. “He can’t die,” she whispered.

“He chose his fight,” Baon said. “And he does so with bravery. This sacrifice is for his people. You cannot rob that from him.”

Khriss tried to tear her eyes away from the horrible scene before her, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t abandon him. Kenton was struggling to his knees, surrounded by sand that was more red than white. It wasn’t a fight, it was an execution.

Suddenly, Kenton cried out, thrusting his hand forward. Sand flashed around him, burning with inner light as it whipped toward Drile. For a moment, hope returned—Kenton’s sand moved more quickly this time, glowing more brightly.

Once again, Drile slapped the five ribbons aside with an almost flippant gesture. He was too powerful—he had too much sand.

“Oh, Kenton,” Khriss said with fear as Drile raised his sand for another strike.

Kenton braced himself. Fortunately, this time he didn’t have far to fall—he was still kneeling in the sand. He barely managed to intercept three of Drile’s ribbons. The other sand master’s laughter was matched with slices of pain across Kenton’s back—no punctures, just cuts.

Kenton shuddered in pain. *Stop toying with me!* he thought with anger. *Finish me, and let it be done.*

He could barely see now. A cut across his brow was pouring blood into his eyes. Somehow, he knew that he still had control of his ribbons, but the five lines of sand hung limply. He was beaten. He had been beaten before the battle began.

Kenton tried to struggle to his feet, but slipped, falling back to the sand. Hard grains bit into his cheek. It was over. He lay resigned, waiting for the final strike, his head turned to the side, his eyes staring unseeingly at the stone wall. An image seemed to form before him, and image of a young boy in white robes. A boy with a determined expression and light brown hair. A defiant boy—a boy that would be a sand master, no matter what others told him.

I was a fool, Kenton thought with despair. *I was always a fool.*

I never belonged in the Diem.

The boy stared back at him, his eyes stubborn. *I am a sand master!* the boy's expression seemed to say. *I am as good as any other.*

You're wrong, Kenton thought. *You're not as good as another—Drile just beat you. You didn't deserve to be a mastrell.*

The boy shook his head. *No. Drile didn't beat you because he's better than you. He beat you because you tried to become something you aren't.*

Kenton lay numbly, watching the image fade. As a boy learning in the Diem, he had claimed he was as good as any mastrell. When had he stopped believing that? Sometime during his fighting, his arguments had simply become words to him. He had realized he didn't have the power of a mastrell; he had kept fighting because he didn't want to give up, not because he believed that he deserved a place.

But once, many years before, he had believed. The boy had believed.

Kenton groaned again, feeling his wounds, his broken ribs, his lashed skin. He felt like giving up and dying. Instead, he struggled to his feet once more.

The Pit wobbled in front of him as he slowly pulled himself up, using the stone wall to steady himself. Drile actually looked surprised to see him rising. The man's twenty-five ribbons swirled quickly, as if eager to taste Kenton's blood one last time.

Kenton reached down to a sand pouch—the only one that hadn't been destroyed in Drile's attacks—and removed a small handful of sand. He held his fist forward, his hand shaking slightly, small trails of white sand dribbling from his fingers.

Obey me, he thought simply. The sand flashed to life. And then, he waited. He didn't sent the sand to the ground, he didn't gather more sand and split it into five, or even three, ribbons. He just waited, his single, pitiful ribbon hanging in front of him.

Drile attacked, his eyes hard. This would be the last time. He intended to finish the battle with this one, final strike.

Kenton closed his eyes, still leaning against the bloodied wall, and ordered his sand to move. The single ribbon leapt forward.

Tiny, weak, insignificant. One ribbon was nothing.

Unless that one ribbon belonged to Kenton.

The tiny ribbon shot forward, ripping through the air at a speed impossible for any other sand master's ribbons. It struck at Drile's sand with a precision unequaled in the Diem, cutting down lines of sand, dexterous and nimble. Kenton had practiced for years, trying to prove that he could do with one ribbon what others couldn't do with dozens. Eventually, he had given up on himself. He'd never realized that he was right.

Stale sand fell to the pit floor as Drile's ribbons fell dead. Kenton opened his eyes to find Drile staring at him with stupefaction, every one of his ribbons destroyed. Kenton's one single ribbon hovered in front of him.

"Impossible," Drile mouthed, gathering another storm of sand around himself. He struck again, sending his sand in waves of five this time.

Kenton stood a little straighter, concentrating on his single ribbon. The small line of sand spun and whipped, zipping back and forth in the air in front of him as it smashed through ribbon after ribbon, blocking every attack that Drile attempted.

Drile had stopped laughing. He was focused solely on his sand now, striking at Kenton with rhythmic waves of ribbons. He watched incredulously as Kenton's tiny ribbon intercepted his attacks, felling them with precise efficiency.

Drile didn't give up. He continued to master with disbelief, trying to find a hole in Kenton's defense. Kenton's little ribbon could cross the length of the Pit in the blink of an eye. It turned and doubled-back on itself neatly. Kenton wove it through the air, slicing through entire groups of ribbons in a single strike.

And there was another advantage. Kenton's eyes were burning, but Drile was obviously suffering more. The more ribbons one had, the faster one's body lost water. Kenton's one small ribbon barely cost anything, but he could see the effects of dehydration in Drile's eyes. Since neither sand master could bring a *qido* into the Pit, it soon became obvious who would run out of water first.

Unfortunately, Drile could still do something Kenton couldn't. Even as they fought, Drile reached down for a handful of sand and brought it up. He closed his eyes, and his ribbons paused in the air

for a moment. His hand began to shine. He was going to slatrify—turn his sand into water.

Kenton's ribbon smashed into Drile's hand, slicing a hole directly through the back of the palm. Drile cried out, dropping the sand and holding his hand in agony. Then he turned angry eyes on Kenton, and his sand rose for another attack. It moved with power and determination, but Kenton's ribbon maintained its blurring speed. The ribbons fell dead as soon as Drile could create them.

"It's over, Drile," Kenton announced. "Concede—I have no desire to kill you."

Drile growled his response, sending a new wave of ribbons. Kenton sliced them down, then drove his ribbon towards Drile's chest. He pulled up at the last minute, slicing a cut across the man's shoulder.

"You're beaten, Drile," he said. "Give up!"

Drile's face burned with undisguised hatred. "I won't be beaten by you!" he yelled back. "I am a mastrell!"

Drile's eyes grew wide, and he raised his hands, summoning more sand around him. Fully a third of the sand in the Pit was already black. Kenton stepped back bracing himself. Drile's face was frenzied, and his sand began to grow brighter and brighter.

"Drile…" Kenton said warningly. "Drile, watch your water. Don't overextend yourself."

Drile ignored him. His skin was beginning to turn a dun color, but his whirling torrent of sand was glowing even brighter.

Kenton cursed softly. He had seen a look like the one in Drile's eyes once before—in the eyes of his father, right before he died.

Drile commanded his sand forward.

Khriss cried out, the brightness of Drile's sand causing her eyes to water. She had actually begun to think that Kenton might win, but Drile's sudden outpouring of power frightened her. It was like a tornado of brightly shining sand had been called up in the center of the room.

Drile screamed, and entire waves of sand began to blast toward Kenton. Khriss heard herself cry out as Kenton disappeared in a cyclone of light. All around the room, *kelzin* were crying out in alarm, and many stumbled out of their seats and began to push toward the door. Grains of sand flew through the room, biting into

Khriss's skin and getting in her eyes. It didn't do any real damage, however, for it wasn't focused on the audience, but on a single point. A point that was no longer visible in the storm.

Drile was still screaming. Though Kenton, the source of his attack, was obscured, Drile himself was visible. His hands were raised high over his head, and he was moaning in a high pitched voice. His face was beginning to dry out.

Khriss watched with horror as the skin on Drile's face pulled in, stretching over his skull skeletally. His cheeks sucked inward with a sudden motion, as if someone had stuck a needle into them and drained out all the water. The skin of his lips curled backward, flaking and drying, revealing the teeth underneath. Drile's tongue shriveled in his mouth, and his wide eyes suddenly deflated, leaving behind a skull that stared ahead vacantly. Still Drile screamed in rage.

His entire body grew desiccate, his robes enveloping his skeletal arms and neck. His voice choked off as the raging storm of sand before him hit a crescendo. Then all was silent.

The dried corpse that had been Drile fell forward onto its knees. Then there was a cracking sound as Drile's waist split, and his top half broke free of his bottom half, falling forward onto the black sand, the knees and legs remaining upright. As soon as his skull hit the ground it shattered, turning to dust. There wasn't a single drop of blood.

Khriss sat stunned, looking at Drile's remains. Only a tiny layer of black sand remained on his side of the Pit—which, now that most of the sand was gone, revealed itself to be much deeper than Khriss had realized. The rest of the sand lay piled where Kenton had been standing—a seven foot dune of black sand slumped against the stone wall, spilling over onto the benches behind it.

"Kenton!" Khriss cried out, jumping out of her seat and stumbling down toward the Pit, walking over seats both empty and occupied. She reached the side of the Pit, lowering herself over the wall and down to the floor. She rushed past Drile's desiccated corpse and began to dig in the sand mound.

"You'd better not be dead," she whispered, digging furiously, looking for a sign of Kenton. "Shella, Kenton, don't be dead."

Her hand bumped something soft. She moved anxiously,

uncovering a hand. Tears streaming down her face, she continued to dig, pushing away swaths of sand, trying to uncover the man underneath. Suddenly, there was a form beside her—a large, dark form. Baon reached down, grabbing Kenton's body around the waist and, with straining muscles, pulled the sand master free from the dune's grip.

Khriss exclaimed in fright as she saw Kenton's body. Sand stuck to his bloodied body, and his form was limp. However, as Baon pulled the sand master out, his eyes fluttered open and he began to cough.

"Ugh," he mumbled, looking at Khriss. "Sand tastes horrible."

Khriss cried out, hugging him, an action that provoked a grunt of pain. "Sorry," she said, immediately, pulling back.

"It's all right," Kenton mumbled, wiping his eyes as he regarded Drile's corpse. Finally, he shook his head. "Poor fool," he mumbled.

"Kenton," Khriss said, checking him over. There wasn't a part of his body that wasn't covered with blood, but most of the cuts weren't deep. "Kenton, you won!"

"Surprising, isn't it?" he asked, reaching over to lift himself to his knees. "That last attack was powerful, but it lacked focus. I don't think Drile even remembered what he was trying to do—I protected myself from his sand with my own. Of course, when he died, it all just kind of fell on me. Here, help me up."

"You need to rest," she chided.

"Not yet," Kenton said, pulling himself to his feet. "I have one task left."

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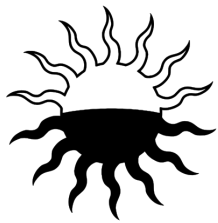


As soon as Kenton got to his feet, a wave of dizziness struck him. He would have collapsed to the ground if Khriss hadn't been there supporting him. *I'm in bad shape,* he thought. However, he couldn't let himself rest yet.

He looked up at the crowd. Half of the seats were empty, but some of the *kelzin* were returning now that the danger appeared to be over. All seven Taishin still sat in their places.

"Well?" Kenton demanded of them, leaning heavily on Khriss.

"Well what, Lord Mastrell?" Heelis asked, looking him over with a dissatisfied eye. "You have slain your enemy."

"Drile slew himself," Kenton announced. "All I have done is prove to the Diem, and myself, that I am worthy of this golden sash. I doubt any of the sand masters will question my right to lead after this."

"True," Heelis admitted. "Assuming, of course, that there's a Diem after the Council meeting a few hours from now."

"Why wait?" Kenton demanded. "You are all here now. Why not vote?"

"It wouldn't be proper, Lord Mastrell," Heelis replied. "Someone might decide to quibble over technicalities in the Law."

Kenton smiled slightly at the jibe. His dried lips cracked painfully at the motion. "I promise you, it won't be me, Lady

Judge," he said. "Cast your vote, and I will accept the result."

"You vow this, Kenton of the Diem?" Heelis asked.

"I do."

Heelis turned to look at the other Taishin. None of them shook their heads, so finally she nodded. "It will be as you say, Kenton. We will vote. I warn you, however, I will hold you to your vow. This time, our decision is final."

"I understand," Kenton said.

"Then let us proceed. Lord General, how vote you?"

Eric found Kenton's eyes, his face so cold it was almost hateful. For a moment, Kenton feared what his former friend might say.

"I vote in favor of the Diem," Eric finally said.

"Lord Merchant, how vote you?" Heelis asked.

"I vote for the Diem, Heelis," Vey announced in his high-pitched Kershtian voice.

Heelis raised an eyebrow. Then she turned to Gennel. "Lord Farmer."

Gennel looked nervous. He shot Vey a look. "Um, I guess I vote in favor of the Diem, Lady Heelis," he replied.

"Lord Artisan, how vote you?"

Rite turned calm eyes on Lady Heelis. "My terms have been met, Lady Judge. As long as the Lord Mastrell keeps his promises, I vote in favor of the Diem."

"I see," Heelis said slowly. "Lord Mason?"

"We vote for the Diem, Lady Heelis," the tall Talloner responded. Kenton caught Dirin smiling triumphantly from the top row of benches.

"And you, Lord Admiral."

Lokkall shot a nervous look at Delious. Then he turned to the Lady Judge. "I vote in favor of the Diem," he said with an unenthusiastic voice.

Kenton smiled triumphantly despite his complaining body. *I almost don't believe it,* he thought with amazement. He turned eyes on Heelis. "It appears the Council is unanimous, Lady Judge," he said.

"Not yet, Lord Mastrell," Heelis said slowly. "We still have one vote to count. My own."

"Surely I have met your requirements, Lady Heelis," Kenton

objected.

Heelis frowned. “Have you? What about the Diem’s debts.”

Vey cleared his throat nervously. “Um, Lady Judge.”

Heelis turned eyes toward the Lord Merchant. “Yes?” she said tolerantly.

“In the spirit of friendship, the Guild has decided to take the Diem’s debts on itself,” Vey explained.

“The spirit of friendship?” Heelis asked disbelievingly.

“Well, that and a promise of generous compensation later on,” Vey replied with a shrug. “It is, however, all quite legal.”

Heelis thinned her eyes. “I’m certain,” she said.

“The Diem’s debts are no more,” Kenton announced with as much strength as he could manage. “And the sand masters have a firm leader. Your conditions are met, Lady Judge.”

“No,” Heelis corrected. “Two of them are met. I had three requirements.”

Kenton frowned. Three requirements? What had the third one been?

“I said that you were required to win the support of the people of Lossand,” Heelis reminded.

“Surely I have done that,” Kenton said somewhat uncertainly. Khriss wiggled closer to him, placing herself underneath the crook of his arm, supporting his weight as his body grew weaker and weaker. He wouldn’t last much longer.

“I don’t know, young Kenton,” Heelis said. “I really don’t know. A leader must have the support of his people—we of the Council do not rule by domination, but by consent of those below us. If the Diem does not have the favor of the people of Lossand, then it doesn’t matter what deals you have made with the Taishin.”

“The people don’t know us yet, Lady Heelis,” Kenton explained. “Two weeks isn’t enough time to educate a nation. However, if we are given time, then I am certain we can bring them to our side. Such has already begun in Kezare—surely you’ve heard the rumors.”

“I have,” Heelis admitted. Suddenly, she looked very, very tired. She sighed to herself.

And I thought my burden was large, Kenton suddenly realized. *Heelis represents all of Lossand. Hers is the only profession whose*

focus is on the rest of the nation, rather than just the Profession's members. She must feel an incredible weight of responsibility.

"The problem is, Kenton, I am not impartial in this matter. I admit it freely—I have always liked the sand masters. Therefore, I cannot vote."

"Then we are at an impasse," Kenton said with a frown.

"No," Heelis said. "I have prepared for this eventuality. I decided that if this possibility arose, I would give my vote to another. And, since I am biased in favor of the Diem, I decided that the one who voted for me would have to be biased against you. You see, Lord Mastrell, this way I can be certain. I chose the person most opposed to the Diem that I knew. That way, if you convinced him, I would know that you could convince anyone. You really would be favored by all of Lossand—sand master, common worker… and Kershtian."

Oh, no… Kenton thought with horror. He had a suspicion he knew who she was talking about.

"Senior trackt Ais, step forward," Heelis ordered.

Ais, unnoticed in the shadows at the back of the room, emerged into the light.

Well, I just lost, Kenton thought with a shake of his head. *At least I gave it a good fight.*

Ais stood stunned. *What did she just say?* He thought incredulously.

"Step forward, Ais," Lady Heelis said.

Ais moved into the light.

"Well, Ais," Heelis announced. "I give my vote to you. The Diem's fate will be decided by your decision. How say you? Does the Hall vote in favor of the Diem or against it?"

Ais looked down at Kenton, trying to stir righteous hatred in his heart. This was the man whose very existence defiled the Sand Lord. This was the man whose blasphemies were greater than any other on the sands.

This was the man who had saved his daughter's life.

If Ais hadn't snapped the day before, he certainly would have at this moment. However, he was drained. He could barely think, let alone lose control. After all this time, the Kershtians finally had a chance to destroy sand mastery forever.

I have to do it, Ais told himself. *I have to remain true to the Sand Lord.*

Ais opened his mouth to speak. However, as he did so, his daughter's face appeared in his mind.

You will attempt to become my friend, Ais's own words, spoken coldly to Kenton, resurfaced in his mind. *You will try to laugh with me, prove to me that you aren't what I assume. You may even save my life. None of this will change my opinion.*

Kenton hadn't saved Ais's life. He had saved something far more important. To deny the Diem would be to wish his daughter dead, and Ais could not do that.

"I vote in favor of the Diem," Ais whispered.

The entire room looked at him for a moment, stunned. Then Kenton let out a sigh of surprised joy, hugging the darksider woman at his side. The room filled with sound as people began to talk.

Ais slunk back into the darkness. *Yesterday I betrayed my family, now I have betrayed my God. What is left for me now?*

Ais bowed his head and left the room a broken man, leaving the sounds of joy behind him. The Diem would probably never know the full cost of its survival.

As Kenton cried out in joy, his body finally decided to give out on him. He began to slip out of Khriss's arms. Fortunately Baon caught him, lifting him up again.

"It appears I have no choice but to reinstate the Diem," Heelis said. "I ratify you as Lord Mastrell, Kenton. Congratulations."

Kenton smiled one last time. Then he fell unconscious.

"He's my cousin," Dirin explained, bringing Kenton a cup of chilled juice. "The Lord Mason wasn't willing to listen to me, but he was willing to listen to Serin. I got back as soon as I could."

"Good job," Kenton approved, reaching for the cup. His body was covered in bandages—he had cuts in places he hadn't realized he had skin. He had spent most of the day under the ministrations of Draft healers, letting them wrap him in bandages—a process supervised, of course, by Khriss, who had wanted to make certain they didn't use any 'primitive' doctoring techniques. Kenton was weak, but on the whole he felt good, considering what he had just been through.

"Um," Dirin said nervously. "I did have to promise him ten sand

masters to help in the mines."

Kenton smiled. "Don't worry about it. That's fewer than I had to promise to Reegent."

Dirin shrugged, moving to clean off a table of cut bandages.

"Have you talked to the rest of the sand masters like I asked?" Kenton asked.

Dirin nodded as he worked. "They accept you, sir, even the ones who used to follow Drile. Some of them are actually beginning to believe that one ribbon can be as powerful as dozens. Either way, you shouldn't have any trouble from them—except for a few, who think you tried to have Drile killed."

"What?" Kenton asked, leaning back in his chair. It was nice to know that his rooms were actually his rooms—that he wouldn't lose them sometime in the next few weeks.

"It's really strange, sir," Dirin admitted, turning with a frown on his face. "There's one of Drile's old followers—Terr—who claims you hired Kershtian warriors to try and kill Drile. Apparently, he thinks you sent those Kershtian assassins that have been trying to kill Drile."

Kenton froze. "Kershtian assassins tried to kill Drile?" he asked.

Dirin nodded. "Sure, just like they tried to kill you. Didn't you know that?"

Kenton sat stupefied. "No," he said. "I guess I haven't been paying enough attention to the Diem—I had other things on my mind. But, why would the Kershtians try to kill Drile? He's was working with them."

"Maybe he betrayed them," Dirin suggested.

"Maybe," Kenton said, unconvinced. He leaned back thoughtfully. He stared at the stone walls, wondering about the attacks. It was possible, he supposed, that Drile hadn't been behind the fall of the Diem. But, if not him, then….

"Sands!" Kenton exclaimed, leaping out of his chair and limping toward the door.

Kenton found him in a small living chamber on the second floor. He sat in a stiff carapace chair, watching the door as Kenton entered. The room was stark and unadorned—a contrast to the lavish Mastrell's quarters a flight above.

"Hello, Elorin," Kenton said quietly, entering the room.

“Hello, Lord Mastrell,” the old sand master replied. His eyes were sorrowful. Just like they had been ever since the Kershtian attack a month ago. Kenton had assumed it was just his loss of sand mastery.

“Elorin,” Kenton said slowly. “I want to know how you survived the attack a month ago.”

Elorin didn’t answer immediately. “I survived because the Kershtians didn’t want to kill me,” he finally answered.

Kenton closed his eyes in pain. All this time, he had thought it was Drile. “You poisoned the water, didn’t you?” he asked. As always, it had been Elorin’s duty as the Lord Mastrell’s assistant to prepare the water for the ceremony.

“No,” Elorin said in an almost distracted way. “It was the bowl. That way, every time new water was poured in, it received the taint as well. It’s called KaDo, a rare Kershtian spice that accelerates dehydration. Even I didn’t expect it to work as well as it did.”

“All this time, you’ve been watching me and directed the assassins meant to kill me,” Kenton said, opening his eyes and looking down at the balding older sand master.

Elorin nodded.

“Why, Elorin?” Kenton demanded. “Why betray the Diem?”

Elorin looked up, meeting Kenton’s eyes with a sorrowful look. “When your God commands, Lord Mastrell, you listen.”

“Your… God?” Kenton asked with amazement. “Sands! When did you convert?”

“Six months ago,” Elorin explained. “Ker’reen is true, Kenton. I know it is.”

Six months—the same time that Elorin had resigned his position as Head of Acolents.

“At first, I wanted to quit the Diem,” Elorin explained. “But the A’Kar himself sent me a letter, commanding me to continue on as before. But, I couldn’t. I couldn’t use my powers when I knew they were evil. So, I just stopped. No one really noticed. I always have kept to myself.”

“And then he ordered you to betray us,” Kenton said flatly.

“It would have been better for you in the end,” Elorin said with despair. “Better that several should die now so that souls will not be lost in the future. Of course, I wouldn’t have done it, except….”

“Except?” Kenton asked, feeling numb.

“The Sand Lord appeared to me,” Elorin said, his eyes completely honest. Haunted, but honest.

“Oh, Elorin,” Kenton said, shaking his head. “You’ve made things very difficult for me.”

“Well, then,” Elorin said. “I shall make them easy for you, Lord Mastrell. You see, two days have passed. I am allowed to try again today.”

Kenton frowned, noticing for the first time the dark object beside Elorin’s chair. The man removed a cloth from its top, revealing a shiny *zinkall* underneath.

“Elorin,” Kenton said warningly.

The man ignored him, putting the *zinkall* on his arm and proceeding to pump one of its chambers.

“Don’t do this, Elorin,” Kenton warned.

“You had better kill me, Lord Mastrell,” Elorin responded, looking down at his weapon. “This arrow is coated with *terken* carapace. Your sand won’t be able to stop it.”

“Elorin, I…” Kenton said, pained, calling a handful of sand to life.

Elorin raised the *zinkall*. “Kill me,” he whispered. “I am ready to go.”

Kenton paused. Elorin fired the weapon, and Kenton dodged reflexively, sending forth his sand. His body gave out at the stress, toppling him to the ground. Fortunately, Elorin was a horrible shot. The arrow went wide, striking Kenton in the arm.

Kenton’s sand, however, flew truly. It took Elorin in the chest, slicing a neat hole through his heart. The undermastrell toppled backward into his chair. He took a few pained breaths, then fell still.

Oh, sands, Kenton thought, pulling himself to his feet with difficulty, holding his arm. *When will this stop?* He stumbled from the room, leaving the corpse behind. Outside he found Dirin leading a line of sand masters.

“I brought them,” Dirin explained.

“Don’t worry,” Kenton said. “He was alone.”

Dirin paused. “And…”

“I was right,” Kenton said sorrowfully.

Khriss watched with dissatisfaction as Kenton landed on the balcony and walked into his room. “You’re supposed to be resting,” she reminded.

Kenton shook his head. There was a look of sorrow on his face. There was a new bandage on his arm, one stained with blood.

Khriss felt a stab of fear. *What now?*

“Elorin,” Kenton explained in response to the question on her face. He took a seat in the center of the room, sighing as he relaxed. His chest was also bandaged, where the healers had pronounced him the owner of three cracked ribs.

“Elorin?” Khriss said, trying to place a face with the name. “The balding man?”

Kenton nodded.

“What about him?” Khriss asked. The man had been so unassuming, she usually hadn’t paid much attention to him.

“He was the leader of the assassins,” Kenton explained. “He converted to *Ker’Reen* worship a number of months ago, and has been working against us ever since.”

“Oh, Kenton,” she gasped. “I’m sorry.” She knew, quite powerfully, how painful a betrayal could be.

Kenton shook his head. “I should have seen it sooner.”

Khriss paused. Kenton looked so hurt, but she had something she needed to tell him. “Kenton,” she said slowly. “I… can’t stay here on dayside.”

Kenton looked up, meeting her eyes. Then he rested back. “I know,” he said with a sigh.

Wrong answer, Khriss thought with despair. He really didn’t want her. He was like Gevin, pretending. Well, not completely pretending. Gevin had been a liar; Kenton just wanted to protect her feelings. *I should have realized that he wouldn’t want me,* Khriss though with a quiet shake of her head. In a way, she had realized it. Why would Kenton want her?

“Elis is in trouble,” she explained. *And I would abandon it for you.* “I am a duchess; my people need me.” *Not as much as I need you. Ask me to stay.*

“I had a feeling you were going to say something like that,” Kenton said with a sigh. “How long before you leave?”

Khriss barely held back the tears. “Not long,” she said. “I need to

leave as soon as possible. Today, perhaps."

"So soon?" Kenton asked.

"Elis needs me," she repeated. *You know that is a lie, Khriss. Why would Elis need you? They've probably forgotten who you are.*

It made sense. First Eric, then Elorin, now Khriss. Perhaps on another day, he would have objected more. But after what he had just experienced, Kenton was expecting something horrible to happen—and Khriss's leaving was just about the most horrible thing he could imagine.

You should say something, he told himself. *Tell her how you feel.* Unfortunately, he suspected that he would just embarrass her. Every time she had gotten close to him, she had immediately pulled back for some reason. Kenton suspected he knew what it was. He was an experiment to her—a 'primitive.' She couldn't fall in love with him.

In his depressed, self-pitying world, it made perfect sense. When he opened his eyes, she was gone.

Khriss actually waited until the next day to leave. Kenton stood on the docks, watching the packmen load her things. He bid a thankful farewell to Baon and Cynder, gave Khriss a chaste hug, bidding her to return when her country was safe once again, then watched her walk up the plank to board the ship. Behind her, the packmen lugged up three barrels of white sand—she claimed she was going to find a way to make sand mastery work on darkside.

Kenton stood on the dock for a long time, watching the boat sail away. He watched it long after he lost sight of Khriss's beautiful, long hair fluttering in the wind. Then he watched the horizon long after the ship had disappeared.

"Khriss, please stay," he finally whispered.

But, of course, it was too late.

Kenton turned with a sigh, nodding for Dirin to follow him as he hired a dockman to return them to the shore. He had saved the Diem, rescued sand mastery when everyone thought it was lost. But he felt as if he had lost something far more important.

Ais set aside his trackt's uniform. He would never wear that again. Instead he packed a few simple robes in his bag. He owned few possessions beyond his clothing, none of any importance.

“Where will you go?” Mellis asked, standing on the far side of the room.

Ais bowed his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “The deep sand, I think. I need answers, Mellis. My prayers yield nothing.”

“I’m coming with you,” she decided.

“You need to take care of Melly,” he replied. “I need to do this on my own.”

“No, Ais,” his wife corrected. “That is where you are wrong. You don’t ever need to do anything alone.”

He looked up, meeting her eyes, then lowered his own in shame. He didn’t deserve her. “All right,” he said. “But I intent to visit *Ker Kedasha*, the capitol itself. Lossanders are not treated well there.”

“I don’t care, Ais,” she vowed. “I’m not going to sit here and wait, and neither is Melly. If you’re going to the deep sand, then so are we.”

“You’ll have to act like a Kershtian woman,” he warned.

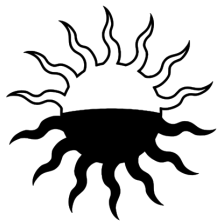
“I can do that,” she said with a defiance that no Kershtian woman would dare show.

Ais smiled slightly. “All right. Let’s go, then.”

He would go to the A’Kar himself. Maybe the holiest man on the sands would be able to answer Ais’s questions for him.

If not, then he would just have to find another place to look.

– EPILOGUE –



Across the sands from Lossand, on the border of the deep sands, there was a city whose culture made Lossand look primitive, whose politics made the Taishin appear child-like, and whose population made Kezare a tiny village by comparison. The cradle of Kershtian civilization, the grandest center for the arts and sciences on dayside, the largest center of business on the sands, it was Ker Kedasha, the Kershtian capitol.

Composed entirely of tents—tents that spread for miles—Ker Kedasha looked like a conglomeration of darkside mushrooms. Each tent competed with its neighbors in style, shape, and color. There were massive constructions that could hold thousands of people at once, and there were tiny hovels that barely kept the sand out.

In one of the largest tents in the city, a meeting was taking place. The masters of Kershtian society, the leaders, the pundits, the *Klin*, the wealthy, and the important were meeting. The Choosing, it was called. From this meeting, the man who would shape Kershtian society for the next fifty years would be chosen. And, for the first time in centuries, the choice was not certain.

Men argued. Others rebutted. Each spoke respectfully—this was Kershtian society, not Godless Lossand. Still, there was a sense of tension in the room. The A'Kar's attempts were well known. He had nearly destroyed the sand masters, an amazing feat. That alone had

gained him many supporters.

Others pointed out, however, that the Diem had not been destroyed. A mastrell lived on—the A'Kar's assassins had failed. There was a Kershtian proverb, they reminded—a pinch or a dune, it is all sand. It didn't matter that the A'Kar had killed a lot of the mastrells, as long as one still lived, the blasphemy would continue.

These arguments were also strong. The A'Kar's failure to destroy the mastrells was troubling. He had much to complete his goals, but he had failed. Now the Kershtian merchants had to deal with hostility from their Lossandin associates. As advanced as Kershtian culture was, it still needed trade with Lossand to get metals, amongst other things.

War could also deliver those things, the A'Kar's supporters whispered. They didn't do more than hint, however. War was not a thing that merchants found attractive, and many Kershtians were also merchants. Still, the idea was intriguing to some—mostly the younger, less established members of the meeting.

The vote was cast, and the High Merchant won—though the vote was incredibly close. The members of the meeting congratulated one another. It had been a fine meeting, full of fine discussions. In the end, their choice had been difficult. They had made it, however, and now everyone could go back to their own business.

They were completely surprised, therefore, when they stepped out of their tent to find that during their deliberations, the A'Kar's holy warriors had surrounded and taken the city.

The A'Kar smiled at them, suggesting that they rethink their decision.

Kenton stood on his balcony, looking down at the courtyard, his face disconsolate. He didn't know what it was—he had grown increasingly depressed in the weeks following his victory. He should have been elated, or at least satisfied. Instead, he was morose.

He looked out over the Diem. It was working smoothly now, much the way it had before the fateful attack. There were major differences, however. The sand masters as a whole were stronger—Kenton had taught them the overmastery trick. He had managed to extend his own powers to six full ribbons, though he had been right, the more one tried the trick the smaller the result one received.

Still, Kenton didn't worry. Sheer power wasn't always the only factor—Kenton's own talent lay in a different area.

Another difference in the Diem could be seen down below. Children playing in the courtyard. Some of the sand masters who survived had families, and Kenton had invited them to bring their wives and children into the Diem. This had easily solved the problem of who got the upper rooms—the third floor rooms were the largest, therefore Kenton gave them to those with families.

The Diem was a happier place now, he could sense that, even if little of its joy extended to him. He had made good on his promise, and the sand masters were proving extremely useful in Kezare business. Lord Rite's craftsmen were always inventing new ways to make use of sand mastery, and the returns were greater than any had expected. It would still take decades to pay the Guild back, but all involved were satisfied with the results.

A month before, Kenton had announced his new plan for giving sashes. They would now be granted for both skill and power. In addition, he made provisions for increasing in rank. Those who showed promise and increased their abilities could move to a higher sash. In fact, under Kenton's plan, no acolent would be given the golden sash at first. There would be no more fourteen year-old mastrells. Now, the golden sash would take years to earn, even for a powerful sand master.

It was a good system, and Kenton was pleased with it. He had made a few exceptions at the beginning, giving out two golden sashes to the most promising of the sand masters. He needed mastrells to help him with the Diem's leadership. For some reason, he was having trouble focusing on his duties. It probably had to do with his depression, he guessed.

A knock came at his door.

"Come in," he said, still leaning against the carapace banister.

"Progress reports, sir," Dirin explained, walking into the room. "I think Terr might be deserving of an undermastrell's sash—he has been working hard, and the Overmastery-empowerment has effected him strongly."

Kenton nodded absently, barely giving Dirin's forms a look. "Do as you think is best," he said.

"Yes, sir," Dirin said, bowing slightly. He turned, moving toward

the door. But then, however, he paused.

"Sir?" he asked.

Kenton looked up.

"I don't mean to be forward, sir…" Dirin began.

"Speak your mind, Dirin," Kenton said.

"Sir, you have to get over her," Dirin said. "It's been three months now."

"Get over her?" Kenton said, turning. "What are you taking about?"

Dirin blushed slightly. "The duchess, sir. She's gone—you shouldn't let your loss affect your ability to lead."

Now Kenton blushed. "I don't know what you're talking about," he mumbled.

"Don't you?" Dirin asked.

Kenton frowned. The boy was growing more brave, lately. That wasn't a bad thing—except when it came to questioning Kenton's love life.

But, confronted with it, Kenton was forced to admit the truth in Dirin's words. He missed Khriss. He missed her a lot. She dominated his dreams; her face always seemed to be hanging in the back of his mind. He longed to hear her annoying questions, and wished she were around to get angry at him. He hadn't had a good argument since the Council vote three months before—everyone just did what he said.

Khrissalla, why did you have to go? But, he knew the answer to that. Responsibility was something he understood all too well now. He respected Khriss for returning to darkside to help her people—that was her duty. Of course, he could respect her for the decision and hate her for it at the same time.

Kenton sighed. Dirin was right, though. He had to do something—he wasn't doing his own duty as long as he was focused on Khriss.

Get over her. He shook his head slowly. *I don't think so.*

"Dirin, charter me a ship."

The boy frowned. Of course, he wasn't really a boy—he never had been. He was only two years younger than Kenton, though everyone assumed he was younger.

"Where to, sir?" Dirin asked.

"Darkside," Kenton announced with a smile.

“Sir?” Dirin asked with surprise. “But—”

“You’re in charge until I get back. You’ve been taking care of this place this entire time anyway.”

Dirin’s eyes grew wide. “But, sir! I couldn’t. I’m not a mastrell, I’m just an acolent.”

Kenton pulled off his golden sash. “Not any more, you aren’t.”

“Sir, you can’t give that to me just because you are leaving,” Dirin said with a blush.

“That’s not the reason, Dirin,” Kenton said truthfully. “I was intending to give one to you anyway. You’re the weakest sand master I know, but you’re also the most competent. The Diem will prosper under your guidance. It’s stable now; everyone knows what to do. You have two new mastrells. They’ll help you—both are older men, who have been in the Diem for a long time. I suspect you three will do a much better job than I could anyway.”

“I doubt that, sir,” Dirin replied, eyeing the sash indecisively.

“I’m good for a fight, Dirin,” Kenton said, “but I know my weaknesses. When there’s not a crisis, I’m hardly worth the gold in my sash. Trust me—you deserve this.”

Dirin accepted the sash with wide, disbelieving eyes. Kenton smiled, patting him on the shoulder. Then he turned, looking out over the Diem and toward the horizon. He felt invigorated for the first time in months.

Well, Khriss, you came to dayside to find your prince. You’ll have to settle for me instead. I’m coming.

Nazrilof

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